

# cineACTION!

A MAGAZINE OF RADICAL FILM CRITICISM & THEORY

\$7.00

No. 19/20  
Winter/Spring  
1990



**SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE:**

# CRITICAL ISSUES



**CineAction!**  
**No. 19/20**  
**May 1990**

**The Collective:**

Kass Banning  
 Andrew Britton  
 Bryan Bruce  
 Scott Forsyth  
 Florence Jacobowitz  
 Richard Lippe  
 Janine Marchessault  
 Susan Morrison  
 Robin Wood

DESIGN: Kevin Connolly

LAYOUT & PASTE-UP: Kevin Connolly

TYPESETTING and PMTs: Escalibur

PRINTING: Delta Web Graphics

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:**

Stills for *Parting Glances* courtesy of *Atra*

CineAction! is published quarterly by the CineAction! collective. Single copy price is \$4.00. Subscriptions: 4 issues/\$15.00 (individuals) and 4 issues/\$30.00 (institutions); overseas, add \$10.00 for airmail.

**Mailing address:**

CineAction!  
 40 Alexander St., Apt. 705  
 Toronto, Ontario  
 M4Y 1B5

Business Manager: John Anderson

Telephone (416) 960-9946

Manuscripts (typed, double-spaced) are welcomed. They should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. The editors do not accept responsibility for their loss.

The opinions expressed in individual articles are not necessarily endorsed by the editorial collective.

All articles herein are copyright © May 1990 by CineAction! and may not be reproduced without permission.

ISSN 0826-9866

Second Class Mail Register No. 7057  
 Printed and bound in Canada

This issue was assisted by grants from the Writing and Publication Section of the Canada Council and from the Ontario Arts Council.

**Front Cover: Robert De Niro in *The Mission***

# Contents

Critical Issues RICHARD LIPPE, SUSAN MORRISON	Page 1
Critical Realism: Subversive Commercial Art FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ	Page 3
Consuming Culture: The Development of a Theoretical Orthodoxy ANDREW BRITTON	Page 11
Right Wing Chic: Adam Partrey & R. Kern Fingered!! BRYAN BRUCE	Page 20
Holy Men in the Wilderness: <i>The Mission</i> and <i>Sainte-Marie Among the Hurons</i> DEBORAH ROOT	Page 28
<i>The Last Temptation of Christ</i> : A Fragmented Oedipal Trajectory TONY WILLIAMS	Page 33
The Celluloid Contradiction: An Other Look at <i>Parting Glances</i> JOHN CHAMPAGNE	Page 43
Fugitive Details: Readings of Image and Content in Two Films by Max Ophüls, <i>Madame de . . .</i> and <i>Lola Montes</i> SUSAN LORD	Page 52
Cracks in the King's Armour: Stephen King, Stanley Kubrick and <i>The Shining</i> VIVECA GRETTON	Page 62
Pedagogy in the Perverse Text JOHN McCULLOUGH	Page 74
Theory vs Experience: Alice Miller and the Status of Contemporary Psychoanalytic Theory ROBIN WOOD	Page 84





# CRITICAL ISSUES

The publication of this double issue incorporating *CineAction!* 19 and 20 marks both the end of the '80s and the end of our fifth year of existence as a viable film journal. Looking back, we note with relief and a certain amount of wonderment that we have come thus far. Certainly, five years ago, no member of the collective would have foreseen our tentative venture into Canadian publishing as being anything other than exceedingly adventurous. None of us had had any experience with the pressures that a quarterly imposes on its producers, nor with the somewhat byzantine twists of magazine distribution, both in Canada and the United States. As has been mentioned in the last issue of *CineAction!*, there have been a number of changes in the collective.

Three of our founding members — Maureen Judge, Lori Spring, and Anthony Irwin — have chosen to pursue other outlets for their time and energy. Andrew Britton and Robin Wood have both decided to take a leave from full time participation in the collective, but will continue to maintain ties as contributing editors.

In the beginning, we had optimistically aimed for a magazine that presented a homogeneous position from which to argue our film criticism to the public. Five years and many articles and debates later, we know that that was an impossible goal. However, what we feel we have achieved is a Canadian film journal that provides a forum for writers on film of diverse interests and diverse backgrounds. We have consciously built



our issues around themes that reflect the interests of our collective members as well as those of our intended readers. While Canadian films and filmmaking have been important to us, we have also paid critical attention to (and expressed our affection for) both mainstream and independent American films, classic and contemporary European films, third world cinema, and the avant-garde from whatever country of origin.

During the '70s and early '80s significant academic developments in film study occurred greatly altering what had been a largely untheorized area in which critical practice tended to be either insular or journalistic. Feminism, psychoanalysis, ideological critique, and even semiotics were introduced to the field in an attempt to open up previous exclusionary and de-contextualized positions. For numerous theorists and critics, the common vision was to accommodate a post-modern localized exchange in which an ongoing and productive dialogue could flourish.

However, we see the past few years as witnessing a polarization of positions once again in film

criticism. On the one hand, the university continues to produce and promote academic writing of the most arcane elitist variety, unreadable by and uninteresting to many people; and on the other hand, the majority of magazines publish film writing that too closely resembles 'journal-ese' in its slick catchy prose and superficial readings or rather 'reviewings' of the latest film.

*CineAction!* will continue to strive to reach as wide readership as possible without sacrificing the critical issues that we feel so strongly should be dealt with, without neutralizing the important political and cultural issues inherent in cinema and criticism today.

We would also like to thank our readers for their support over the past five years — without it, of course, we wouldn't be here today. In addition, we would like to encourage submissions for the journal from our readers, either articles or responses to published pieces.

**Richard Lippe**  
**Susan Morrison**



# Critical Realism:



## Subversive

## Commercial Art

by Florence Jacobowitz

von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus*



**W**ithin the boundaries of autonomous commercial artistic production, which is regulated by conservative, repressive codes of censorship, and is identified by a Realist aesthetic, one finds critical, transgressive art which evidences the fundamentals of modernism. These films can be described as modernist in a specific, more profound sense of the term, in which its use presupposes a critical engagement with social practice in addition to a self-conscious questioning of aesthetic representation. The entirely abstracted, self-referential and purely formal evolution of modernism in both theory and practice, conveniently depoliticized in contemporary discourses such as post-modernism or formalist criticism, deserves to be recognized for what it is: the most reactionary form of cultural theory and production to emerge in the last decade, in many ways rivalling its claims against the conservative, normative Hollywood product in its refusal to address any expression of social agency. By contrast, critical Realist art challenges consensual norms and their representations in popular culture, exposing the social contradiction that fuel the repetition and rearticulation of conventional narrative art.

Examples of critical Realism can be found in a wide range of popular art, including painting, motion picture production, the novel and theatre. The paintings of Manet, Courbet and Hopper, the Sternberg-Dietrich collaborations in the '30s and many of the films by Ophüls, Lang, Sirk, Preminger, Cukor and Minnelli, the novels of Flaubert, Eliot, Wharton, the plays of Ibsen, are all examples of Realist art which crosses over into modernism. The purpose of the following discussion is not to distinguish yet another, newer than new classification, but to challenge some ill-conceived, rigid demarcations which serve as a rationale for dismissing transformative works as compromised bourgeois entertainments sold in a vulgar capitalist marketplace, and to demystify the 'big bang' theory of the birth of modernism and avant-garde practice in Europe and in the Soviet Union in the '20s. Instead, I suggest that we think in much more complex, fluid terms, and consider the overlaps and cross-pollination of ideas and sensibilities, across nationalities, across continents and across centuries.

The consciousness of the 'modern' can be traced back at least 200 years, to the French Revolution, the Romantic movement, the discoveries of new

technologies, mass communications, photography, tourism, and the growth of the railways. The ingredients of movement and transience are essential elements of both modernism and Realism. Like modernism, Realism is also directly informed by a sense of contemporaneity and change. Realist works are distinguished by the artists' determination to capture the moment, in opposition to art which monumentalizes an event, freezing it into eternity. (See Linda Nochlin's *Realism: Style and Civilisation*, New York: Penguin, 1971). For example, the avant-garde movements of German Expressionism and French Surrealism find their roots in non-political traditions such as late 19th century decadence and the aesthetic movement. Walter Benjamin links Brechtian epic theatre to Strindberg's historical dramas (as well as to German baroque drama/Trauerspiel). Motion pictures, the most commercial art-producing industry to emerge in this century attracted and provided work to left-wing emigré and refugee artists who proceeded to inflect the conventions of narrative art with the essence of German modernism. The confluence of a variety of conditions — the historical

if one insists upon a declaration of allegiances to firmly outlined categories. If one is selling low culture in a system of capitalist production one cannot create socialist art. If one tags a work as Realist, it cannot evidence affinities with other traditions. This leads, conveniently, to a blanket rejection of popular artforms, a position articulated originally by Adorno and the Frankfurt school which has proliferated since retaining its currency in left-wing critical circles. The condescension towards and subsequent rejection of popular art and entertainment is one that, unfortunately, has dominated politicized film criticism since the late '60s. (It is particularly insufferable as it is an elitist position which masquerades for class consciousness. In fact, it thinly veils the intellectual theorist/filmmaker's desire to remain at arm's length from low culture for the masses. It has evolved and mutated through Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, Mulvey and others, but maintains essentially, at its base, the unchallengeable premise and belief that Realism (and particularly as inflected in Hollywood's classic period) is inherently sexist and can only transmit and reproduce a patriarchal discourse. This the-

## **The condescension towards and subsequent rejection of popular art and entertainment is one that, unfortunately, has dominated politicized film criticism since the late '60s.**

moment, the use of particular stars, producers, and the highly stylized genres — provided fertile grounds for the production of critical Realist art. The emigré artists' output in Hollywood is a more obvious example of the direct influence of German modernism on an indigenous American cultural form; one can trace parallels in the transplantation of "The International Style" of modern architecture in America in the '30s. One can find many examples of modernist art and architecture co-opted to serve multi-national capitalist industry, but one can also find examples that not only mimicked an aesthetic but retained the movement's essential commitment to criticising the status quo while providing pleasure or comfort to the disempowered masses. The suggestion that mainstream Realist art can potentially instigate the kinds of shocks and disturbances attributed typically to modern or avant-garde practice is only problematic

ory which declares that a style of formal representation is empowered with a conservative politics is interdependent with the belief that the Hollywood film industry is a monolith dedicated to serving the government and the dominant, ruling class. These blanket myths have yet to be fully and adequately challenged. The terminology itself — "the Hollywood system," "the star system," — which emerged from the wake of structural semiotics, legitimises and perpetuates the reductive misconceptions. 'Hollywood,' comprised of a variety of studios made up of individual executives, producers and creative staff were unified in their identity as a commercial industry, but highly amorphous otherwise. Executive chiefs and producers like B.P. Shulberg, Albert Zugsmith and Walter Wagner, scriptwriters like Casey Robinson, Jules Furthman, Ben Hecht, the range of directors and stars too numerous to mention, the variances



between studios like Paramount and Warner Brothers as compared to MGM outline a far-ranging diversity in terms of politics, as well as aesthetics. Many studio heads like Louis B. Mayer, were not only committed to legitimising the industry morally but artistically, insisting upon aesthetic control and intervention, and often conceiving of themselves as high-powered patrons of the arts. Why were left-wing artists welcomed in Hollywood if the studios' priorities were exclusively committed to producing a politically safe product? The early trend towards employing the cream of UFA (like F.W. Murnau) was based, in part, on a strategy of hiring "artists" to produce high art, and inviting international talent who had proved their success in Europe, a market in which Hollywood dominated. While I do not wish to undertake a revised social history of Hollywood at this time, there are a number of variables which complicate current assumptions regarding the industry's conservative politics, which deserve mention. Neil Gabler has recently published *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988) wherein he theorizes that, as displaced Jewish immigrants, the studio chiefs were only too eager to reproduce an idealised vision of American democracy; one might balance this thesis with one that suggests that, as outsiders, they suffered exclusion and were empathetic towards employing other (largely Jewish) political refugees and exiles, sharing their antipathy towards fascist national socialism. Just as it is not coincidental that left-leaning emigré artists found work in Hollywood, it is likewise not coincidental that the anti-communist witch-hunts chose Hollywood as their home base, or that the American government proceeded with the rapid dismantling of the industry's power immediately following the trials in the '50s. The standard explanations offered: Hollywood was chosen in order to exploit the instant publicity stars could generate, or the government righteously persecuted the trusts (when other more powerful multi-national trust conglomerates remained untouched), or the sudden surging interest in television (what were the government interventions in that industry?), or the move into suburban life, circumvent and displace another theory which remains largely ignored. The McCarthy persecutions and the zeal with which the government attacked one of the founding principles of capitalism — monopoly business — point to the profound threat Hollywood

posed to the ruling consensus, eliciting a response which far outweighed the possible transgressions perpetrated. The right (and the extreme right) has yet to underestimate the 'seriousness' of entertainment and, ironically, has always been more attuned to the possibilities inherent to the Brechtian strategy of appropriating the conventions of popular Realism to transmit a criticism of hegemonic norms of social organizations, identity and gender relations. Somewhere between these two extremes circulates a theory of popular culture which allows for the potential of offering critical artforms to a spectator who will find the experience of seeing, communally, the dramatisation of social tensions, desires, and contradictions disseminated through the vast networks of the medium, pleasurable and worth paying for. I'm not suggesting that critical Realist art was or is the norm; it clearly depends on the use of the style, genre or artform.

Hollywood produced a wide range of what is vaguely termed narrative Realist art and there is no formalist 'neutral paradigm' which stands for all films released in the classic period. (See Andrew Britton's "The Philosophy of The Pigeonhole: Wisconsin Formalism and the "Classical Style" *Cineaction!* 15.) The codes, systems and regulations that have been standardized as classical narrative art are challenged by many realist films which subvert the supposed formula. Decades of creative production are lumped together as a classical canon whose conventions and devices produce a self-effacing style. The characteristics most often outlined: the dominance of causality in terms of the manipulation of time and space, the construction of a single point of view supported by a strong identification figure often played by a well known star, the triggering of early forms of masculine scopic vision, combine to ensure and legitimise an ideological, correct response in a centred male subject. These theories depend upon the assumption that the spectator's critical faculties and abilities to produce a reading have been mysteriously arrested by the combination of the above. Assuming the spectator is endowed with intelligence (not unlike the critic who *can* produce a reading and see beyond the sleight-of-hand), s/he can discern the manner in which many Realist works explore the gaps inherent in the representation of the real and rupture the linear presentation of time and space. The whole notion of the "effacement of style" deserves serious re-evaluation

given the cinema's fundamental dependence on highly stylized genres and conventions. The authors' 'omniscient' voice often unmask itself through a variety of strategies, like the use of irony, metaphor, a pronounced use of mise-en-scène or editing, and qualified forms of identification which complicate singular point-of-view. Consensual notions of gender and sexual politics are more often challenged than confirmed through the use of particular stars. The spectator experiences the dislocations and is sensitive to the gaps between what could be and what is. The result is an experience which communicates a sense of authenticity and truth, but avoids the illusionism and versimilitude of naturalistic representation so often conflated with Realist films.

Hollywood Realist films evidence their roots in traditions which are far from naturalistic: the melodramatic imagination and the bourgeois novel. Realist narratives are *essentially* stylized, heightened and directly concerned with the means of representation. The demands of versimilitude fluctuate historically, and were never a priority in terms of evaluative criteria in the classic period. It became valued increasingly after the influx of European neo-realism and with the rising popularity of television. Acting styles correspondingly change with the training received at Eastern drama schools like that of Lee Strasberg's famed Actors' Studio, however, even Method acting is highly stylized in its obsession with naturalistic gesture and speech. Mainstream cinema dramatizes the ordinary through heightened representations of types. One finds an enactment of experience which is larger than life, and performed. The dramatization of particular conflicts, tensions and desires is intense and can be authentic, but motion pictures were never rooted in self-effacing traditions.

To better understand this one must detour back to the formative sources of realist narrative art. The melodrama offers a set of premises and conventions which are inherently anti-naturalistic. It is a specifically modern mode which allows for the dramatization of crisis in the secular, bourgeois world. The form is intrinsically polemical; the early form of the crisis rooted in class, expand to include the crisis of gender/sexual relations, which is pivotal to the stability and maintenance of secular bourgeois society. The reproduction of this social system depends on an acquiescent working class who will agree to exhaust themselves willingly and have their



resources drained for the benefit of the ruling class and an acquiescent female population who will agree to quarantine themselves at home and restrict their sexual relations to their husbands so that paternity and female disempowerment can be ensured. It is fitting that the characteristics of the melodrama are excess, intensity of feeling and formal exaggeration because the drama it enacts is one where the stakes are of the highest order: the society's means of reproduction which will secure its empowerment. The recurrent need for the dramatization of these stories testifies both to the urgency and tenuousness of the balance of power. The melodramatic mode points beneath the surface, and places emphasis on naming or unmasking that which cannot be spoken easily or articulated legitimately. It circumvents language and censorship, sublimating its conflicts and visions through style, music, vivid décor, spectacle, gesticular acting, utilizing metaphor, allegory and typological characters to emblemize a variety of social positions. Melodrama invites a close and emotional response to the positions dramatized, but also distances as it is too obvious, overly full, acted and

entation lend themselves to self-reference and point to acting and representation.

The novel differs significantly from the theatrical melodramas in the way it fills in character types with psychological information, intensifying the reader's empathy and identification with the protagonist. At the same time, strategies of writing and narration, often used to represent what cannot be named or spoken, demand a more sophisticated process of reading. Highly developed strategies such as irony and the use of metaphor and allegory create a doubled, layered discourse which works to critically place the strong emotional response solicited by the protagonists or their situations. The reader not only identifies with the protagonist as an isolated individual, but with the position s/he represents — their predicament indicates a larger social nexus.

The artist can use the conventions of Realist narrative art to solicit an emotional and critical engagement. The fear of admitting to an intensely felt emotion, one that may even elicit tears, is gendered. The more closely experienced art forms like the opera or melodrama are debased in part, as a form of denial.

narrative's reference to a variety of strategies which complicate and act to mediate critically. (Again, one must assume that the spectator, like the theorist/critic, can produce a reading and does not automatically regress to infancy, to the moment where the ego-identity is formed.)

The concept of soliciting a directly-felt emotional/sentimental response, characteristic of early forms of theatrical melodrama, was achieved through the spectator's identification with a position of struggle; the characters were, in fact, flatly typological and emblematic. One never forgot that one was identifying with one side of the polemic, with a political struggle that was suppressed in other public forums. The hyperbolic form of communication, be it an excessive pronouncement of music, spectacle or gesticular acting style gave what Peter Brooks terms a 'plastic figurability' to intense, grand emotions. (See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 46) One can trace the parallels in the dynamics of the significant grand operas which, at one time, were an unacknowledged political arena for the acting out of social struggles. The dramaturgy is conceived to articulate the sentiment, to raise the ordinary into the realm of the sublime, imbuing the experiences of everyday life with significance. In order to maintain its political perspective (as it was a form used for social analysis) the dramatic work must situate the emotion which springs from an oppressed position so that the spectator/reader can refer feelings of frustration, anger and empathy to the sources of their victimization. This defines a qualified form of identification; one which insists upon a critical placement. And, as is often the case, the spectator has a much greater awareness than the protagonist. As Douglas Sirk once said, "your characters should remain innocent of what your picture is after."

Bertold Brecht demanded that epic theatre foreground the argument it is making while allowing the spectator an outside position. This desire to 'arouse' the spectator without relinquishing one's critical faculties is precisely what some of the great feminist women's novels of the last century achieved. (At times, a canon is useful, depending on one's evaluation of significance and 'quality': there is George Eliot, the Brontës, and Edith Wharton and there are others.) The argument (and the conflicts and tensions it inevitably evokes) was brought to the point of recognition,

## **This desire to 'arouse' the spectator without relinquishing one's critical faculties is precisely what some of the great feminist women's novels of the last century achieved.**

stated. Its sudden ruptures and plot changes, its dependence on coincidence point to a symbolic meaning.

The melodramatic mode serves as a basis for all Realist narrative films in conjunction with the bourgeois novel which adds further complexities. The traditions of the 19th century woman's novel for example, are also polemical in nature as their project is the analysis of secular society, the woman's place and gender relations. As they addressed a large female readership and were often written by women, the narratives are concerned with female experience and many were openly feminist and highly subversive in terms of their agenda and the formal strategies used in writing. The dramas reach into areas most often excluded or marginalized, like that of the domestic. Because the experience of femininity demands role playing and attention to costume, spectacle, and specularity, its formal means of repres-

They threaten masculine codes of emotional repression. The intensity of feeling need not undermine the possibility of critical distance and observation, however, one rarely is committed to issues being dramatized in a completely 'detached' manner, if one identifies with oppression and entrapment.

Motion pictures and their Realist predecessors depend upon strategies of identification. The narrative invites entry into a fictional drama, a constructed representation of the real, and at the same time, refers one back to one's own life experiences. The process of narration resists and intervenes with that of identification. The psycho-analytical/semiotic 'mirror' paradigm, so central to much of current theory, denies this tension which is essential to the working of significant Realist art. The reader can commit her/himself willingly and profoundly to the protagonist's diegetic world and negotiate the





Max Ophüls' *Letter From an Unknown Woman*

as Brecht demanded, through the strategies of writing which placed the argument critically, and offered a complex layered perspective to the represented experience. Andrew Britton argues this convincingly:

The dialectic of insideness with/outsideness from the world . . . is the characteristic mode of significant mimetic art and its formal means are infinite but it is — it must be insisted — a fact of the *writing* of the work. It testifies to that possibility which is open to mimesis of constructing critical metaphorical models of reality, and its tendency is not to solicit but to resist and disturb identification. (Andrew Britton, "Metaphor and Mimesis: Madame De . . . Movie 29/30 p. 99)

Mimetic art foregrounds its means of representation, and invites the spectator to question and think about what unfolds before them. Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner make a similar point

For Realism, far from harmonizing style and subject in a way that makes one forget the presence of a style, accentuated the gap between mundane reality and the artistic attempt to transcend it in the very act of describing it. (Charles

Rosen and Henri Zerner quote Albert Boime's passage from his book *Thomas Couture in their collection: Romanticism and Realism The Mythology of Nineteenth Century Art*, New York: Viking, 1984 p. 160).

This argument, suggesting that Realist art not only does *not* mask its status as a fictional form of representation but does, in fact, accentuate the gap between signifier and signified, brings us back to the realm of the modern.

Some of the most significant strategies used to shift the reader/spectator's perspective 'outside' and which acted as a safeguard against persecution and censorship, were the use of irony (often combined with a stringent or sardonic wit) and that of metaphor and allegory. The melodrama, with its use of intense symbolisation and typological characters can be described as being allegorical. The drama often emblemized the struggle experienced in the social world. One can begin to understand why Eric Bentley conceives of the links between the melodrama, expressionism and epic theatre. He claims that Brecht inflects the allegorical mode of the melodrama, and its overt stylization with the didacticism of Marxist thought (see Eric Bentley's *The Life of Drama*, New York;

Atheneum, 1974, p. 214). Benjamin also describes a path leading from the allegorical imagination of medieval and baroque drama to epic theatre. (Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, London: Verso, 1983, p. 18.) These are forms readily available for the infusion of political meaning because of their dependence upon emblems and symbols and the demands made upon the spectator to produce meanings and make reference to their lives. The potency of the genres relies upon the allegorical structures which underlie them. This is equally true of the woman's novel; the allegorical nature of the gothic novel for example, refers the reader to their own experiences of confinement and desires of protest.

Both allegory and irony shift the reader's perspective beyond the drama and shield the subversive meaning from complete censorship. I feel compelled immediately to stress the difference between the use of these strategies as tools of political criticism and the manner in which they have been appropriated by some recent examples of post-modernist art (see Robin Wood's comparison of *Blue Velvet* and *Shadow of a Doubt* in "Leavis, Marxism and Film Culture," *CineAction!* # 8). The 19th century novel, for instance, often uses irony as a device of distancing and





Vincente Minnelli's *Undercurrent*





Vincent Minnelli's *Madame Bovary*

commentary, but the purpose is not to flatter the reader's sophistication and intelligence, or to acknowledge a superiority over the debased cultural form and the sensibilities expressed through the form. On the contrary, irony and metaphor can offer a privileged position, but not one that condescends, establishing additional perspectives to better understand the experience being dramatised. The *respect* for the deeply felt sentiment was never sacrificed to the ego-inflating devices that produce self-flattery, cynical mockery and the feeling of being above and *beyond* the struggle. The distance provides a platform for commentary without relinquishing the work's affinity with the position which stands against the variety of oppressions dramatised.

Irony establishes a bifurcation, creating the kind of inside/outside relationship characteristic of Realist art. It offers a counterpoint to the narrative's presentation of reality, draining the excessive sentiment out of the melodrama. It acts as a deflating device, setting an inflated emotion or subjective vision into relief. It is key to the meaning of the Realist art created by many 19th century artists like Daumier, Manet, Courbet, Flaubert, the Brontës, Eliot and Wharton and 20th century filmmakers like Ophüls, Sternberg, Lang and Sirk. Irony produces a discon-

tinuity, an estrangement, and asks the reader to question the representation. Linda Nochlin writes that irony was often used in Realist works to juxtapose the elevated and the banal in a straight-faced way. Representing the ordinary/everyday in a serious manner is a central Realist concern, and as feminists have asserted, a political aspiration.

Irony demands a critical detachment and often foregrounds the 'omniscient' author or the narrating voice as it acts to comment and mediate between the spectator and the diegetic world. There is, for example, a disjunction established between the narrating voice in *Wuthering Heights* and the narration of events which works to question the notions of omniscience and the genre of gothic romance. Irony also functions to upset conventions and social expectations, and is used as such by authors like George Eliot, Jane Austen and Edith Wharton, where the pretense of manners is uncovered. Irony is often impersonal and dry and carries a bitter undertone. One can step outside of one's culture as Wharton so frequently does, but remain deeply committed to the heroines whose suffering and lack of choices move the reader deeply. (I'm thinking of Wharton's *Bunner Sisters* or *The House of Mirth* as two remarkable examples). Edith Wharton talks about George Eliot's wit and irony and ten-

derness. (*The Writing of Fiction*, New York: Scribner, 1925, p. 64) To be ironic and tender need not imply an incongruity or contradiction. It reiterates the possibility of remaining at arm's length yet supportive and empathetic towards the protagonist who lacks the reader's knowledge. Max Ophüls achieves supremely this blend of irony and tenderness in his American melodramas. One may be distanced from Leonora Ames in *Caught*, Lisa Brendle in *Letter From an Unknown Woman* or Lucia Harper in *The Reckless Moment*, but one feels greatly empathetic as well.

Irony finds fertile ground in representational art because of its inherent referentiality. The process of mimesis lends itself to the possibility of distinguishing layers of meaning. This is also true of the visual arts. Paintings, for example, can convey irony in the way "they comment ironically upon other works or upon a style or convention" or depict ironic situations. (See D.C. Muecke's *Irony*, London: Methuen, 1970, p. 6.) Conventions are used in a way that makes one question their meaning. Manet is a good example of an artist whose work is often highly ironic. Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner (p. 170) mention Manet's *Olympia* as an example of a painting which makes reference to typical depictions of the female nude so as to uncover concealed hypocrisies.



The reference parodies through repetition, allusion and variation. His *Olympia* confronts the spectator as if to acknowledge our intrusion and her awareness of her nudity. Like many Realist subjects, she is neither idealized nor sentimentalized.

The articulation of style, the use of a star or generic conventions can be used in the cinema to provide ironic commentary. Here is where irony is both dependent upon and complicated by authorship. Ophuls, Cukor, Minnelli and Sternberg were empathetic to their heroines. Other creative artists had a more ambivalent relationship to their protagonists. Tania Modleski makes this argument in relation to Hitchcock. His complicated identification (latent or otherwise) with the feminine position both intrigues and frightens, and contributes to a complex presentation of gender relations in his work. (See Modleski's *The Women Who Knew Too Much* New York: Methuen, 1988.) The classic debates raging around Flaubert's *Emma Bovary* are a case in point. Flaubert's famous detached, ironic style evidences contempt for his heroine and life generally, but also a tremendous fascination with a character trapped by romanticism and the disempowered position common to her gender. This attraction belies any simplistic declaration of reprehension or disinterest (and one can suppose that Flaubert had mixed feelings about his pre-occupation and identification with his heroine. I have yet to find a documented source for his well-known declaration, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," but the assertion is not without justification in his novel. Flaubert understands his heroine's passions and her imprisonment.) There must have been other 'mediocre' stories that he could have chosen as a showpiece for his aesthetic concerns. Clearly, more remains by the end of the novel. Emma's suicide does not inspire indifference and is hardly secondary to the means of narration; this is not to say that it takes precedence or that style becomes effaced. Flaubert's writing is accentuated, but the distance it effects does not compromise one's involvement with the heroine and the events which lead her to her only escape through death. Flaubert's novel indicts the society that creates Emma's unattainable desires, and secures Charles' inability to save his wife. As Rosen and Zerner note (p. 170) it is significant that the young boys who laughed at Charles Bovary at the opening, never return. However determinedly objective the remainder of the



Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*

narrative is, "It is 'we' who will cause Emma's death," 'we' in the sense of social opinion and pre-existing ideological norms. Rosen and Zerner include Manet and Flaubert in the tradition of avant-garde Realism; these works present a critical attitude toward the social world being presented and draw attention to the means of representation. Style acts as commentary. The spectator is decentred and never receives an easy, coherent and seamless reproduction of social life. One actively participates in the construction of meaning, remaining at arm's length as many of these works are tempered by irony and an overstated use of aesthetic conventions. Described as such, these works veer into the modern, undermining any easy classification.

Many films produced during the classic period can be described as a form of American epic cinema. Many of these

were created by emigré directors and artists who had direct links with European modernism; examples include the Sternberg-Dietrich collaborations in the '30s, the films of Lang, Ophuls, Sirk and Preminger and indigenous American directors like Minnelli. One can also include the work of particular stars like Greta Garbo or Bette Davis. Like many Realist works, these are profoundly aware of their status as fiction, pronouncing their materiality through acting, décor, music and song or a restless camera. They often give form to subversive desires and sentiments which find no other cultural outlet of expression.

Critical Realist art has a long history of challenging consensual notions of gender and representation and is rooted in traditions which are highly stylized, polemical and demanding of spectatorial intervention and awareness. The lines are not clearly drawn.



# CONSUMING CULTURE

## The Development of a Theoretical Orthodoxy

by Andrew Britton

In my article on postmodernism in *CineAction!* 13/14, I argued that the analysis of contemporary western culture advanced by postmodern theorists who think of themselves, and wish to be thought of, as being "on the left" does nothing more than recapitulate, in a fashionable new vocabulary, an argument about the commodity form of culture which was first propounded by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. The argument is no more acceptable now than it was then, and the present essay is a critique of the work of its most influential advocate, T.W. Adorno: the nature and the scale of the influence in socialist cultural studies are one's principal excuse for discussing ideas which, in themselves, are strikingly incompatible with a socialist theory of culture. Walter Benjamin, a colleague of Adorno's and, to such a marked degree, the more distinguished mind, contested these ideas; and I shall also be concerned in what follows with what seems to me to be the solipsistic character of the Adorno/Benjamin debate, which ends in a stalemate that has yet to be properly resolved.

Adorno accepts Marx's proposition that "the commodity in general combines exchange-value and use-value," and he then proceeds to argue that "in completely capitalist society" cultural products cease to exist as use-values at all; their use-value, in fact, is "replaced by pure exchange-value."<sup>1</sup> It follows, therefore — inasmuch as commodities can be defined in terms of the realisation of use value as exchange-value — that the commodification of cultural products *is*, in itself, the negation of culture. As soon as a work becomes a commodity, any "distinction between the logic of the work and the logic of the social sys-



tem"<sup>2</sup> disappears: from this point onwards, the logic of the work is, and can only be, the logic of the capitalist market. We are now in a position to conclude that "under monopoly all mass culture is identical,"<sup>3</sup> in that all cultural practices and all works are uniform embodiments of the principles and interests of exchange. There may well appear to be distinct differences between cultural products, but these differences are merely cosmetic: indeed, they are a necessary function of the "classification, organization and labelling"<sup>4</sup> of consumer groups.

How formalized the procedure is can be seen when the mechanically differentiated products prove to be all alike in the end. That the difference between the Chrysler range and General Motors products is basically illusory strikes every child with a keen interest in varieties. What connoisseurs discuss as good or bad points serve only to perpetuate the semblance of competition and range of choice. The same applies to the Warner Brothers and Metro Goldwyn Mayer productions"<sup>5</sup>

The differences, in other words, are both illusory and strategic; while they are not in essence differences at all, they serve nevertheless, in their capacity as *mechanical* differences, to create a false sense of the abundance and freedom of the market. Thus from the theoretical point of view it is as absurd to differentiate film A from film B as it would be to distinguish between two brands of soap powder, for the distinctions are themselves only functions of the market which has destroyed the very possibility of cultural difference. The conclusion is as terrible as it is inescapable: as soon as culture becomes "subject to the law of exchange . . . it amalgamates with advertising"<sup>6</sup> The commodity form, in reducing works to exchange-values, coopts them at the same time for the *promotion* of exchange. They become advertisements for the social logic which they embody.

This striking argument creates a number of conceptual problems by which a Marxist writer might have been expected to be particularly embarrassed. As we have seen, cultural products have been appearing on the market since the second half of the 16th-century. If it is really the case, then, that it is in the nature of the commodity form as such to reduce cultural products to pure exchange-values, how are we to explain the fact that the lamentable state of affairs which Adorno describes so feel-

ingly did not materialize before the first half of the 20th-century? Adorno does not address this question at any point, for the purposes of his argument are better served by a very careful delimitation of the kinds of work which it is legitimate to think of as being commodities. It turns out, in fact, that where culture is concerned commodification can be attributed to, and identified with, certain technologies which we are invited to think of as quintessentially 'modern':

"For only the universal triumph of the rhythm of mechanical production and reproduction promises that nothing changes and nothing unsuitable will appear."<sup>7</sup>

Naturally, Adorno is sufficiently sophisticated to anticipate and preempt (to his own satisfaction) the charge of technological determinism, and he goes out of his way to emphasise that the "standardisation" of culture is an effect, not of the technology itself, but of its subordi-

**How are we to explain the fact that the lamentable state of affairs which Adorno describes so feelingly did not materialize before the first half of the 20th century?**

nation to the interests of capital. Unfortunately, however, Adorno's appeal to 'technique' and to the class interests which control it only compounds the problem to solve which the 'technique' has been invoked in the first place: for Adorno is still not in a position to explain why "films, radio and magazines" *in particular* should have played the historical role which he ascribes to them. The technologies which enable the "mechanical production and reproduction" of works of literature, sheet music and certain kinds of visual and plastic art were invented and largely subordinated to 'the interests of capital' several centuries before Adorno's critique of the culture industry was either written or (we might add) published; and although he never ventures to commit himself on the matter, it is

probably safe to assume that even Adorno would hesitate before dismissing the whole of bourgeois literature as a reflection of the logic of the social system.

In assuming this, we are paying Adorno the reverse of a compliment, for we are saying, in effect, that the argument about the 'culture industry' which Adorno wishes to advance *presupposes* a patently spurious use of the concepts on which, at every point, the argument depends. Adorno claims, repeatedly, that he is describing a cultural situation which is specific to contemporary capitalism, and he draws on crucial Marxist categories to substantiate the description; but the categories have the practical effect of demonstrating, not only that the description is false, but that it has been arrived at on the basis of assumptions which are actually incompatible with the use of the categories. It would certainly be possible for some kind of Marxist to argue that bourgeois culture expresses the interests of the bourgeoisie and is therefore deplorable; such an argument would be neither intelligible nor Marxist, but it would at least make sense in its own terms. It *cannot* be argued, however, that the 'culture industry' is uniquely deplorable because capitalist ownership of the reproduction processes on which the industry depends has the unprecedented effect of reducing cultural products to pure exchange-values. The alleged 'effect' cannot be derived from the alleged 'cause': indeed, cause and effect fail even to make contact with each other.

The discrepancy is profoundly betraying, and it tells us two things. In the first place, Adorno can only sustain his account of the 'culture industry' by wilfully refusing to acknowledge that cultural products with a commodity form had ever existed before the fateful advent of "films, radio and magazines", and by identifying particular historical modalities of the commodity form of culture with commodification *tout court*. This is a theoretical error, but it is an error which has a function in Adorno's argument, for the ideologies of culture and, above all, of 'Art' to which he subscribes oblige him ingeniously to rewrite the history of bourgeois society in such a way as to suggest that certain of its artefacts and cultural traditions had no connection with the market. I will return to this point a little later.

It is clear, in the second place, that for all the freedom with which he deploys a materialist vocabulary, Adorno never analyses 20th-century American culture



in materialist terms, and shows no interest whatever in doing so. Indeed, read in its proper context in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the chapter on the 'culture industry' serves the interests of a theory which is plainly *anti*-materialist. The theme of the book is the way in which Enlightenment rationality, because of its alleged inability to reflect on the "destructive aspects" of the social progress to which it is committed, inevitably degenerates to the point at which rationality is entirely geared to the planning, realisation and maintenance of authoritarian forms of social control. "The curse of irresistible progress," Adorno and Horkheimer announce grandly, "is irresistible regression," and the dialectic of Enlightenment rationality, working itself inexorably through, leads us, not to utopia, but to the barbarism of the totally planned and ruthlessly homogenised repressive society, governed by "the rationale of domination itself."<sup>8</sup> The 'culture industry' and German fascism represent the necessary outcome of this logic — and it is a sufficient comment on Adorno's materialism that he considers these two phenomena to be virtually indistinguishable and that he undertakes to explain both of them in terms, not of specific historical processes, but of the "self-destruction" of a single ideology. The Marxist terms ('monopoly,' 'exchange-value,' 'commodity fetishism') serve a purely forensic purpose: they give an appearance of theoretical substance to what might otherwise seem to be an ad hoc collection of empirical details and bald assertions, and they carry, to Adorno's mind, an impressive weight of moral disapprobation, by virtue of which vitriolic outbursts of spleen and animus appear to be granted a kind of impersonal warrant.

Unfortunately, the various components of the 'Enlightenment' thesis — the notion of historical change as "irresistible regression"; the conviction that this regression is induced by the inability of rational thought to reflect upon itself; the belief that an absolutely homogeneous class society is theoretically conceivable, let alone realisable in practice — unanimously repudiate the Marxist idioms in which they are couched. Adorno's 'culture industry,' and, for that matter, his 'Nazism,' are not historical entities at all. They are logical abstractions of mathematical purity — the foregone conclusion of the theory of history which is then invoked to denounce them. In that they are, as Adorno describes them, mere postulates of the theory, the denunciation is always

correspondingly complacent and self-serving, and the extreme unpleasantness of Adorno's writing is inseparable from the tendentious and inauthentic nature of the displays of savage indignation which are so strikingly characteristic of it. The intensity of the indignation only serves to emphasise the degree to which its objects have been conceived with a view to indulging it, and while the results are no doubt especially distasteful where anti-semitism is concerned, they are hardly less so when Adorno takes it upon himself to deplore "the misplaced love of the common people"<sup>9</sup> (telling phrase!) for "the wrong that is done them" by jazz and the Hollywood cinema.

Many persons who have no notion of a dialectic of Enlightenment — or a dialectic of anything — have reached the Frankfurt School's conclusions without its assistance, and even the most cursory perusal of the available literature on the media will disclose the fact that arguments identical to Adorno's flow very

**Baudrillard differs from Adorno  
only in his substitution of the term  
'the media' for the culture industry  
and in his propensity for an  
etiolated form of individualist  
anarchism . . .**

readily from the pens of authors who could never be accused of a sympathy for Marxism, and who are even actively hostile to it. Baudrillard's "requiem for the media," for example, effectively rehearses the 'culture industry' thesis in order precisely to demonstrate the total bankruptcy of dialectical materialism, which, we are told (in something like Adorno's tone), is wholly incapable of theorising a social situation from which the very possibility of contradiction has been banished, and in which 'the media' function, with irresistible efficiency and impeccable precision, to perpetuate a system of "decentralised totalitarianism."<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard differs from Adorno only in his substitution of the term 'the media' for 'the culture industry' and in his propensity for an etiolated form of individualist anarchism: he feels that

'the media system' is homogeneous and impermeable, and he is opposed to organised political action by what Adorno would call "the common people" because it only serves to strengthen the system,<sup>11</sup> but he is willing to proclaim that "graffiti is transgressive (because) . . . it simply smashes the code" which 'the media' unilaterally impose on every other form of cultural practice.<sup>12</sup>

This is less than impressive, and Baudrillard's slick, dandified post-modernity may seem merely disreputable; but it has at least the virtue of demonstrating where the 'total system' argument leads us. Whether we base our account of this system on the inexorable laws of exchange and the commodity-form, in Adorno's manner, or decide, in Baudrillard's, that in the end 'the media' embody and perpetuate "the terrorism of the code"<sup>13</sup> — the tyranny of Language Itself — we will only succeed in the end in rationalising what we describe. Both Adorno and Baudrillard, in their different ways, set up a formalised model of 'media culture' for a stinging indictment which turns, by degrees, into an apology. It is an unfortunate consequence of this line that it entails an attitude to "the common people" which is uncomfortably close to what can be imagined to be Madison Avenue's attitude to them, though no doubt the average advertising executive is less sensitive on the subject of their oppression.

"The culture industry as a whole has moulded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product. All the agents of this process, from the producer to the women's clubs, take good care that the simple reproduction of this mental state is not nuanced or extended in any way."<sup>14</sup>

Thus materialism; meanwhile, in the opposite corner —

"There is no need to imagine (television) as a state periscope spying on everyone's private life — the situation as it stands is more efficient than that: it is the *certainly* that people are no longer speaking to each other, that they are definitively isolated in the face of a speech without response."<sup>15</sup>

Any element of truth which these passages may contain is negated by their writers' ulterior commitment to a model of the world in which the "common people" cannot *but* appear as the drugged and stupid victims of a successful confidence trick: where there is a



deceiver, there *must* be a gull. Adorno is even prepared to risk an entire psychology of the commodity form by means of which it can be proved that the stupidity of 'consumers' is an objective corollary of relations of exchange. He starts out from a grotesque paraphrase of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, which is boiled down to the proposition that 'consumers' venerate things made by themselves, even as they are alienated from these things by the exchange-form. Undeterred by the fact that 'consumer' is not a Marxist category, and blithely ignoring the omission from this precis of the theory's most crucial element (the class relationship between labour and capital), Adorno continues:

"This is the real secret of success. It is the mere reflection of what one pays in the market for the product. The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert. He has literally 'made' the success which he reifies and accepts as an objective criterion, without recognising himself in it. But he has not 'made' it by liking the concert, but rather by buying the ticket."<sup>18</sup>

It may be granted that the Toscanini concert is a commodity, the purchase of which by a 'consumer' may contribute to its success. This concert-commodity, however, is in no sense a product of the consumer's labour, and the analogy with the theory of commodity fetishism can only be sustained by displacing the commodity form of the concert onto the success, which, with the help of those disarming quotation marks, the 'consumer' can then be said to have "made." The analogy depends, in other words, on the suggestion that the success of the commodity is itself a commodity — from which it can be deduced that the "making" of this success by the unfortunate 'consumer' is an act of labour. The reader who is prepared to go along with this sort of conceptual jiggery-pokery will have no difficulty in agreeing with Adorno that since the consumer has had to buy a ticket in order to "make" the success which then rebounds to the greater glory of the appalling Toscanini, s/he has therefore been alienated from the product of his/her labour by the commodity form.

Had anyone bothered to ask Adorno how he *knew* that the person who attended the concert was "really worshipping the money" he paid for the ticket, he would no doubt have replied that this imputed reality can simply be read off the political economy of the

event: it is objectively given, like the worker's relation to capital. But alas, Marx's theory does not require us to infer feelings, motives and emotional states from the behaviour of members of the working class as they go about their daily business, still less does it presuppose that when they buy something they are "really" venerating the money that changes hands in the course of the transaction. The whole ramshackle concoction is sustained by nothing better than an apocryphal pejorative psychology of 'consumers,' the validity of which is rationalised by reference to prior assumptions which are equally arbitrary and equally unsubstantiated. If it is true that "exchange-values destroy use-values for human beings," as Adorno has assured us that it is, then it follows as the night the day that individual acts of consumption *must* represent the consumer's veneration of the commodity *as* exchange-value.



Baudrillard

"Where they react at all, it no longer makes any difference whether it is to Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or to a bikini!"

In the Adorno epigram, theoretical acumen is essentially a matter of the promulgation of alibis for contempt.

It is not the least of the disadvantages of such lines of reasoning (which are, in this respect, the progenitors of Althusser's theory of ideology) that they leave the subtle consciousness of the theorist unaccounted for. Had Adorno attended the Toscanini concert, would he have worshipped the money he paid for the ticket? — and would he have mistaken its success for an "objective criterion" of its value? The cascades of bile which Adorno showers on Toscanini at every available opportunity seem to suggest that he would not, but he never explains how it is that he has been exempted from the common lot;

and while he is ready to assure Walter Benjamin that the proletariat "needs us for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution"<sup>19</sup> he is quite unable to show us how, consistently with his theory, this saving knowledge is to be achieved. He simply assumes that all men except Adorno are moulded as a single type which is unfailingly reproduced in every product of the cultural industry; just as, 20 years later, Althusser and his innumerable epigones would assume that a mysterious providence had granted them a dispensation from the iron law of 'interpellation of the subject.' In a work whose declared theme is the failure of enlightened thought to reflect upon itself, this theoretical black hole looms with an especially portentous largeness, but all accounts of social orders which are supposed to depend, for their own reproduction, on their power to replicate their own practices and priorities in the minds of their inhabitants must eventually be engulfed in some such form of question-begging hypocrisy. The theory can explain everything except its own conditions of possibility. Conversely, if Adorno and Althusser have contrived to escape, why should not another? In accounting for everything *but* itself, that is, the theory accounts for nothing at all: its existence is the tacit contradiction of its contents.

Theoretical inconsequence in these matters goes hand in hand with reactionary politics. The world of Adorno's culture industry can no more be changed than it can be intelligibly derived from any previously existing state of affairs. It is only monolithically and intractably itself, at once alpha and omega, suspended in an historical void without conceivable precedent, origin or issue; and nothing is left for its creator but to express his scorn for the grey somnambulists with whom he has peopled it. But it remains for Baudrillard, who has divested himself of Adorno's vestigial socialistic piety, to adumbrate a 'media world' which not only cannot but should not be resisted — unless, perhaps, through occasional "wildcat strikes" which, though easily defeated, remain sufficiently romantic to generate a frisson in the jaded chronicler of *faits divers*.<sup>19</sup>

'The media' — those who cling to the idea of progress are at least in a position to report that with the passage of time Adorno's 'culture industry' has at last found an appropriate lodging in the discourse of common sense. The point at which common sense and left-Hegelian High Theory meet can be exemplified



by these extracts from a representative piece of 'media sociology.'

"For the world market Hollywood performed an impressive publicity conjuring trick. Although the American film industry was run by a cartel — which largely kept out foreign competition — on the world scene Hollywood was the apostle of free trade and no-holds-barred competition. Its ability to perform this dazzling conjuring trick was partly dependent on Hollywood's location in Hollywood — remote from New York beyond the shimmering desert, cocooned behind the mountains in a large and growing smog of publicity, stardom and illusion."<sup>20</sup>

And again:

"T.W. Adorno at one time claimed that even a symphony concert when broadcast on radio was drained of significance; many mass culture critics also had very harsh things to say about the large audiences which went to western and crime films in the 1930s — films which yet other cultural experts have subsequently decided were masterpieces after all. Even more bizarre, however, is the western intellectual who switches off the baseball game, turns down the hi-fi or pushes aside the Sunday magazine and pens a terse instruction to the developing world to get back to its tribal harvest ceremonials or funeral music."<sup>21</sup>

Mr. Tunstall, of course, lacks Adorno's inwardness with the dialectic, and these hearty, bracing judgments suggest that he has not taken the immanent extinction of the lights of culture quite so much to heart. He even seems prepared to hedge his bets, for he clearly has no intention of relinquishing his long-playing records or advocating a return to Nature on the off-chance that some "western intellectual" will turn out to be right about Toscanini. It may be said, nevertheless, that this is where *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* gets us: the brutal confidence and the philistinism (if not the joviality) are already there, after all, in Adorno's text, and his assumptions and rhetorical strategies turn out to be perfectly congenial to the sort of middle-brow 'serious reading' which he would presumably have despised. That Mr. Tunstall has employed the tabloid adjective "bizarre" to do the tabloid's work we know from that reference to "cultural experts" and "intellectuals" (*pace* Adorno); yet these "experts" are the same people as Adorno's "connois-

seurs," quibbling over the "good or bad points" of artefacts which "every child with a keen interest in varieties" could show to be identical.<sup>22</sup> The appeal to "every child" is an appeal to a sense of the obvious which Adorno shares with Mr. Tunstall, who is similarly disposed to chastise the recalcitrant highbrow with shafts of withering irony, and who is only to be distinguished from Adorno by his eagerness, as a good sociologist, to authenticate his instinctual aversions with the charts, statistics and mountains of miscellaneous hard facts which Adorno thought, quite rightly, that it was not worth his time and energy to compile.

Despite himself, however, Mr. Tunstall makes a valid point; for in assuming that what was once obvious to Adorno and is now obvious to him is also obvious to us, he is actually assuming that the concept of 'the culture industry' is already included in his readers' habitual mental furniture. We imbibe Mr. Tunstall's convictions about the Hollywood cinema with our moth-

**We need look no further than the  
body of work in which the  
existence of 'the media' was first  
proclaimed to discover that they  
lend themselves as readily to  
celebrations of the advent of a  
"global village" . . .**

er's milk, and the term 'the media' is most ardently canvassed, not by sociologists of culture (though they come a close second), but by the institutions designated in the term. It is, as a term, an invitation not to pay attention, and 'critical' appropriations of it are prone to the kind of slippage that takes place here:

"The United States media emerged from, and reflect the assumptions of, American politics. The US media do not merely 'fit' neatly into the US political system, the US media are an important, indeed essential, part of that system."<sup>23</sup>

It would be foolish (and it is, in any case, not necessary) to deny that these

sentences point in the direction of something important, but the phrase "the assumptions of American politics," and the assertion that "the media" emerge from and reflect them ought, it seems to me, to give us pause. What *are* these unitary "assumptions"? — and in what sense can the distinct cultural practices of journalism, advertising, television and movies be said to "reflect" them in a unitary way? The conclusion that "the media" operate in identical ways, and produce identical or mutually compatible effects, is not only preordained by the concept in terms of which the conclusion is reached; it corresponds to an experience of "media products" which we all spontaneously have.

Moreover, we need look no further than the body of work in which the existence of 'the media' was first proclaimed to discover that they lend themselves as readily to celebrations of the advent of a "global village" as to jeremiads against the triumph of barbarism. Marshall McLuhan's hymn to a world made one by the expansion of international communications carefully omits to mention the economic and political interests which the communications systems embody, as Raymond Williams has pointed out with admirable trenchancy;<sup>24</sup> but there is a great deal more than that to complain of. "*The medium is the message* is not a critical proposition," says Baudrillard, "but in its paradoxical form it has analytic value"<sup>25</sup> — and Adorno might well have agreed. Its "analytic value" (it might be better to say "convenience") consists in the fact that it is one of the statements which can be appropriated, without modification, by any political position whatever: like Caesar's wife, it is all things to all men. To say that "the medium is the message" is to assert that the nature of a work can be deduced from the technology of the medium or, alternatively, from the interests which control that technology, and one has only to decide what the technology in itself is, or what the interests are that regulate it, in order to have a general theory of contemporary culture ready-made. The medium/message can be a good or a bad thing, and it can tell a tale, now of apocalypse and now of the Second Coming, now of sex-and-violence and now of monopoly capital, now of the brotherhood of Man and now of the terrorism of the Code: in every case the analysis comes, as it were, pre-cooked, leaving nothing to the discretion of the chef but the spice of value-judgment.

If the fastidious scrupulosity of the



"cultural expert" or "connoisseur" seems misguided for the purposes of the given accounts of "media" or "culture industry," that may well be, however, because the accounts will not do, and I would certainly be unwilling to assume in advance that an interest in discriminating between one artefact and another is in itself incompatible with a radical position.

## Art

"If you defend the kitsch film against the 'quality' film, no one could be more in agreement with you than I am; but *l'art pour l'art* is just as much in need of a defence, and the united front which exists against it and which to my knowledge extends from Brecht to the Youth Movement, would be encouragement enough to undertake a rescue."

T.W. Adorno, in a letter to Walter Benjamin

If Adorno's concept of 'the culture industry,' for all its pseudo-Marxist ornamentation, has been readily assimilated by an anti-Marxist post-semiotics on the one hand and a breezy empiricist sociology on the other, it has a specific function in Adorno's work of which no trace remains in its progeny: here alone it is inseparable from, and may be said actually to subserve, the promotion of an ideology of 'Art.' This ideology is important, not because it is in the least degree acceptable, but because it is a strenuous version of ideas about art which we all take for granted. Two hundred years ago we could not have done so, but these ideas are now a very serious impediment to thought, and we will make no progress until we have confronted them.

The central category of Adorno's aesthetics is "the autonomous work of art," the bearing of which for his discussion of 'the culture industry' Adorno himself indicates when he calls the products of the latter "dependent art" by comparison. The two contrasting adjectives incite to questions which are never answered, or even acknowledged, at any point in Adorno's work. Of what, precisely, does the "autonomy" of the autonomous work consist? — and what is it supposed to be "autonomous" of? Adorno is as clear as he ever is in this passage from a private letter to Walter Benjamin criticising Benjamin's famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*:

"Dialectical though your essay may be, it is not so in the case of

the autonomous work of art itself; it disregards an elementary experience which becomes more evident to me every day in my own musical experience — that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be consciously produced and made. I know of no better materialistic programme than that statement by Mallarmé in which he defines works of literature as something not inspired but made out of words; and the greatest figures of reaction, such as Valéry and Borchardt, . . . have this explosive power in their innermost cells."<sup>27</sup>

Adorno's reference, in the phrase "taboo or fetish," to Benjamin's concept of "aura," may be set aside for a moment: his own attempt to define the characteristic features of autonomous



Walter Benjamin

art has the prior claim on our attention. The definition labours under the double disadvantage that the content of its main component is ambiguous, and that, whichever meaning we chose, we end up with a tautology. It is quite unclear whether the autonomy of art derives from the autonomy of its "technical laws" or from the consistency with which these laws are pursued, and no matter what the answer to this conundrum may be, we are no nearer to knowing than we were how, and in relation to what, the laws achieve their autonomy. And what, in any case, *are* these "technical laws"? Is technique, or the use of technique, in art subject to anything that could be described as a "law"? Artists certainly use techniques, and in doing so they are working with and on conventions — conventions

which can be thought of, in Raymond Williams' phrase, both as "limits" defining the boundaries of artistic activity and as "possibilities" which enable it. A number of artists working over time within the "limits" of a given set of conventions, and exploring their "possibilities," constitutes a tradition. It is far from being the case, however, that the formation of a tradition can be construed as the "pursuit of a law" by the artists within the tradition. On the contrary, the great cultural traditions are remarkable not for the "consistency" with which "technical laws" are pursued, but for the extraordinary diversity and heterogeneity of utterance which is achieved within the tradition's conventional limits. Herman Melville, Charlotte Brontë, Henry Fielding and Virginia Woolf all employed the conventions of the novel; and John Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton and Ernest Hemingway were all American novelists variously employing the novel's conventions at a particular stage in the evolution of the form; but if we try to think of these artists as being in consistent pursuit of a law, we may well come to the conclusion that there were no conventions at all.

This, in fact, is more or less the conclusion that Adorno *does* reach — though naturally, he does not put the thing in quite that way. "Conventions" tend to have an obstinately *material* character: they are formed under specific historical conditions through the agency of persons who inhabit those conditions, and their subsequent development in the hands of other persons is deeply rooted in other conditions which are likewise historically specific. The persistence of conventions over long periods of time does not lift them out of history, for the simple reason that this persistence can only ever be realised through the work of successive historical individuals who use them. It is, in other words, a necessary condition of the persistence of a convention *across* historical time that all uses of a convention are defined by their historical *particularity*, and the elements of the novel which have persisted from Fielding to Stein have only done so on the basis of a series of material social actions.

The pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art, on the other hand, takes place on an altogether loftier plane. Adorno feels, as we have seen, that the unfolding of the dialectic in the actually existing social world has reached a highly unsatisfactory conclusion. Although a Marxist, he continues to hold to the teleological view of



human history which Marx, in his innocence, supposed himself to have refuted,<sup>28</sup> but the 'great end' of the historical process is less than it was once cracked up to be. Far from fulfilling their revolutionary task, the common people (whose superannuation — latterly a favourite theme both of Eurocommunism and of the truculently red-baiting post-modern Left Bank — Adorno was the first to proclaim) have surrendered to the siren lure of capital, and with their abdication from the political scene history can now be said to have stopped. But if it is no longer possible to believe that the promise of happiness will ever be redeemed on earth, the dialectic continues to perform its progressive functions in the realm of the spirit from which Marx so mischievously removed it. It lives on in "the technical laws of autonomous art" — that is, in Hegel's *geist*, now identified exclusively with the aesthetic and decked with a Marxist fig-leaf ("the state of freedom") for the sake of political respectability. Although it is worn with an air, the fig-leaf serves only to draw attention to the nakedness it covers: the existence of an ideology to the effect that works of literature are "inspired" scarcely entitles us to discover a "materialistic programme" in the statement that they are, after all, "made out of words." In that *all* artefacts are "consciously produced and made," whatever their makers may think about them, it is not in the least surprising that "the greatest figures of reaction" should turn out to have an "explosive" radical potential — though on the other hand the claim that one work can be closer to, or further from, the "state of freedom" than another seems to have lost something of its force. Readers of *Screen* in its Althusserian period will be familiar with this ploy, and with the end that it serves: having identified an artistic preoccupation with 'material form' with materialism in the Marxist sense, Adorno goes on to insist that this preoccupation is exclusively the property of a putative avant-garde in the name of which it is possible — nay, one's revolutionary duty — to trounce "dependent art."

Adorno's belief that art has "laws," and that he knows what they are, has the result that one would expect: his work is peppered with, and seems at times virtually to consist of, apoplectic denunciations of "the recidivist element." Artists who are alleged to have departed from, stood athwart or otherwise impeded the forward march of artistic progress are subjected to merci-

less ritual humiliation and harassment, and found guilty of some form of complicity with or indebtedness to 'the culture industry.' The lengths to which Adorno is prepared to go are astonishing:

"In the opinion of this writer — and he is prepared to back it by concrete technical analysis — the work of Sibelius is not only incredibly overrated, but it fundamentally lacks any good qualities . . . It would be interesting to show: *first*, to what extent Sibelius is played over the radio, and *second*, to what influences his popularity is due . . . If his great success is really a fact, and not some sort of manufactured popularity (which is still the writer's opinion), this probably would indicate a total state of musical consciousness which ought to give rise to even graver apprehension than the lack of understanding for great modern music or the preference for cheap light music . . . If Sibelius' music is good music, then all the categories by which musical standards can be measured . . . must be completely abolished"<sup>29</sup>

Needless to say, after these brave words, the "concrete technical analysis" either of Sibelius' music or of the sources of his popularity is not forthcoming: it never is.<sup>30</sup> The value-judgment is obviously ludicrous but the procedure is exemplary of the Adorno anathema.

The Hegelian dialectic, of course, has a nationalistic colouration; and it is, perhaps, the most deplorable paradox of Adorno's work that a Marxist Jew formed by Weimar Germany should have devoted himself with indefatigable energy to theorising the supremacy of *Kultur*. If he contrives to remain unaware of the fact — as he clearly does — that is because the field in which his confidence is most lavishly enjoyed is the field of music, where he is entitled to the assumption that the Austro-German tradition is not only by far the most influential, but also (work for work, and composer for composer) the most distinguished national tradition in bourgeois culture. Music for Adorno means *German* music (or selected features of it) from Bach to Schoenberg, understood in scarcely modified Hegelian terms as the self-creation of autonomous art through the pursuit of its own formal logic. As we might expect, this line proves to be quite extraordinarily difficult to hold, on both political and aesthetic grounds. The Hegelian dialectic and the concept of *Kultur* remain intransigently reactionary, and Adorno

can only accommodate them to a Marxist position at all by reminding us periodically, in moments of embarrassment, that 'progress' is, after all, dialectical and contains elements of 'regression.' This allows him to resolve, after a fashion, the particularly thorny problems raised by that bane of German philosophy, 'the case of Wagner,' which can now be seen actually to epitomise the dialectic's devious tendency to incorporate "the recidivist element" within itself.<sup>31</sup> It permits him, too, to argue at one and the same time that the logic of autonomous art has lead inexorably to modern German music, and that Schoenberg and Webern are to be valued precisely because "their work is nothing but a single dialogue with the powers that destroy individuality"<sup>32</sup> — that is, modern German politics. In his attempt to establish the ideal pre-eminence of a culture which he perceives, in practice, to be degenerate, Adorno was not alone: he has a precedent in 'the case of Wagner,' and he himself provided Thomas Mann with the recipe for *Dr. Faustus*, in which the tortuous "dialogue" of the German genius and the Nazi is re-enacted, at interminable length, around a fictionalised representation of Schoenberg. Schoenberg, who loathed Adorno ("my privy councillor," in Mann's phrase), was appalled, and violently repudiated the novel; yet he was sufficiently susceptible to the mystique it elaborates to have proclaimed, in a chilling and painful phrase, that the invention of serialism would guarantee the hegemony of German music for a thousand years. He most certainly could *not* have said that he, his pupils and (of course) Adorno were the "only individuals (who) are capable of consciously representing the aims of collectivity" in the field of culture, and that every other development in modern music had abandoned the dialogue with the forces of darkness in order to collude with them.<sup>33</sup> The objects of Adorno's familiar fury — the Russian romantics, Sibelius, Stravinsky, Gershwin, jazz — have nothing in common except the fact that they are not German; and it must have been especially galling that the man who prostituted Beethoven and Mozart of the American airwaves was an Italian. Toscanini's debasement of *Kultur* is certainly epistemologically convenient: since it is "not for nothing (that) the rule of the established conductor reminds one of that of the totalitarian Fuhrer,"<sup>34</sup> it provides the perfect theoretical link between the hell of fascism and the hell of 'the culture industry.'



It is perfectly natural, then, in the light of these priorities, that Adorno should have taken umbrage at Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art of Mechanical Reproduction*, which aspires to show that "the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage"<sup>15</sup> by contemporary developments in the technology of cultural production is a progressive development. When one considers the Adorno/Benjamin debate (if it can be called that — it amounts to an exchange of letters), there can be no doubt, it seems to me, of where one's sympathies lie. Benjamin's modesty and disinterestedness compare only favourably with the brutality and lack of scruple of his interlocutor, and his readiness, in the age of darkness that weighed so much more heavily on him than on Adorno, to perceive and try to comprehend the creative elements of the culture of his time is all the more astonishing for Adorno's scornful acceptance of apocalypse as High Theory's Q.E.D.. Benjamin's development (so tragically abbreviated) out of an arcane romantic mysticism to the work on Brecht and Baudelaire is an heroic achievement which must be honoured by any Marxist. And yet the ironic paradox of his disagreement with Adorno is that there is no *conceptual* disagreement at all, as the vagueness and concessiveness of his brief response to Adorno's criticisms demonstrates: the two men's value-judgments are absolutely incompatible with each other, but they are arrived at on the basis of a common theoretical framework which deprives them of their substance. Benjamin's 'age of mechanical reproduction' is merely the inverted mirror-image of Adorno's 'culture industry,' and it is arbitrary in exactly the same way: both concepts depend on the assumption that the mechanical reproduction of works of art begins with the invention of film and photography, and that as a result of their invention, "the total function of art (has been) reversed."<sup>16</sup> Benjamin wishes to take a favourable view of "the tremendous shattering of tradition"<sup>17</sup> which follows, and he does so by arguing that the new cultural technologies objectively embody the political interests of the working-class. The argument is excruciatingly willed and tenuous, and obliges Benjamin to work up a Brechtianised version of the reflection theory of realism. For it appears that film and photography, by virtue of their technology, are in essence 'realistic': they "pry an object from its shell"<sup>18</sup> and show us what is actually there, and in doing so they "manifest in the field of percep-

tion" the general contemporary political process by which reality is gradually adjusted to the masses and the masses to reality.<sup>19</sup> By virtue of the same technology, film and photography are inherently 'critical' in the Brechtian sense: a banalising appropriation of Brecht's theory of a distanciation allows Benjamin to suggest that the technology of mechanical reproduction, in and of itself, generates the critical distance between the spectator and the representation of the real which Brecht attributed to a specific, systematic practice of *performance*.

Adorno, with his antipathy to Brecht to help him, has no difficulty in showing that this is mumbo-jumbo; though Theory and common sense unite to protect him from the perception that his own thesis is only Benjamin's turned back to front. Moreover, he has the advantage over Benjamin at every point that his negative attitude to film does not require him to explain why the cinema

### Benjamin's 'age of mechanical reproduction' is merely the inverted mirror-image of Adorno's 'culture industry,' and is arbitrary in exactly the same way . . .

which actually exists, and which the masses actually like, bears not the slightest resemblance to its imputed essence. Benjamin's explanation takes the predictable form:

"In Western Europe the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations."<sup>20</sup>

"The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the spell of the personality, the phony spell of a commodity."<sup>21</sup>

Given the terms in which the debate is

conducted, Adorno's victory is a *fait accompli*. Benjamin's attempt to maintain that capitalist technical innovation can embody the essential interests of a subordinate class is doomed to incoherence, and when Adorno trumps his hand by insisting that it *must* embody the interests of capital, Benjamin can make no better *riposte* than that capital has alienated the essence of film. Even if this reply were less implausible than it is, it is tantamount to a withdrawal from the field, and Benjamin is eventually compelled to retreat to the equally implausible, and utterly unsubstantiated, notion that "the sound film must be regarded as an operation of the cinema industry designed to break the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, which generated reactions that were hard to control and hence politically dangerous."<sup>22</sup> Benjamin offers this sentence as a "dialectical mediation" between Adorno's and his own, but what it proves is the impossibility of mediating, dialectically or otherwise, between rival versions of the same determinism. One can only yield to the other.

By the same token, the assumptions which Benjamin shares with Adorno give the latter an intrinsic advantage in the parallel disagreement about the value of 'art.' For Benjamin, as for Adorno, 'art' is *kunst*, and the only service which the famous concept of 'aura' performs is that of projecting across the whole of human history from the cave to the invention of photography the aesthete's definition of art as 'thing-in-itself' which is in fact a product of the very conditions of late 19th-century capitalism to which Benjamin wishes to attribute the aura's decay. The whole structure of the essay, in fact, rests on an initial definition of 'art' as an object with "a unique existence in time and space" which excludes, among the 'tradition' arts, literature, theatre, dance and music, and which cannot even be sustained in the fields of graphic art and sculpture, where it might seem, at half a glance, to be most plausible. Benjamin is able to overlook the fact that his definition is patently false because he takes for granted the attitude *to* art which he betrays here, in drawing an analogy between the aura of 'art' and the aura of Nature:

"We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts



its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch."<sup>43</sup>

The feelings Benjamin is describing are always most appropriately enjoyed in the horizontal plane, and while no one would have dreamed of adopting a semi-recumbent posture before a work of art until a few decades before Benjamin was born, the essay invites us to think of it as an historical universal: culturally speaking, people have always been prone "and, as it were, convalescent."<sup>44</sup> The explanation of this endemic lassitude in the face of cultural products is that the products themselves have always invited it: the Paleolithic mural, the medieval Madonna and "the secular cult of beauty" which has, apparently, "prevailed" in western art since the Renaissance,<sup>45</sup> are all alike emblems of a "cult value" to which prostration has been the tradition response and which bespeaks art's parasitical dependence on ritual<sup>46</sup> throughout its history.

Benjamin claims to object to 'art' in this sense — as who would not? — but his failure to recognise either its historical sources or his own surreptitious allegiance to it draws him implacably to the conclusion that human culture to date consists of a collection of mystified fetish objects whose value must be "liquidated" if culture is to be renewed. Benjamin felt constrained to approve; and it was his unfortunate fate that there was no one on hand to disabuse him but an aesthete who was made of considerably sterner stuff. Adorno objects, quite rightly, that 'art' is not in itself "a taboo or fetish," but he does so precisely in the name of "art for art's sake," now refurbished as the *sine qua non* of a materialist aesthetics and prescribed to Benjamin as the antidote to Brecht.

Before "art for art's sake" could recommend itself to Adorno as a Marxist slogan, it had to be invented by the bourgeoisie for use in a quite different connection. The phrase embodies a view of art which D.H. Lawrence, in *Women in Love*, ascribes to, and repudiates in, the sculptor Loerke:

Ursula wavered, baffled. Then her words came. "But why does he have this idea of a horse?" she said. "I know it is his idea. I know it is a picture of himself, really —" Loerke snorted with rage. "A picture of myself!" he repeated in derision. "*Wissen Sie, gnädige Frau*, that is a *Kunstwerk*, a work of art. It is a work of art, it is a picture of nothing, of absolutely

nothing. It has nothing to do with anything but itself, it has no reflection with the everyday world of this and other, there is no connexion between them, absolutely none, they are two different and distinct planes of existence, and to translate one into the other is worse than foolish, it is a darkening of all counsel, a making confusion everywhere. Do you see, you must not confuse the relative world of action with the absolute world of art. That you must not do."

Here, very plainly, is Adorno's "autonomous work of art," which is even defined in terms of an opposition between the kingdom of necessity (known to Loerke, who was not a Marxist, as "the relative world of action") and the state of freedom. It is implicit in the opposition that "the absolute world of art" is not only autonomous of, but superior to, the other world, and Adorno expresses his sense of its superiority in his own distinctive way: "the history of serious music since Mozart (is) is flight from the banal . . ."<sup>47</sup> Adorno is speaking from his "own musical experience" (a subject on which Schoenberg, in his bitter way, was wont to indulge his scepticism), and "serious music" here is to be equated with "serious art."

The power of the street ballad, the catchy tune and all the swarming forms of the banal has made itself felt since the beginning of the bourgeois era."<sup>48</sup>

We may ignore "the beginning of the bourgeois era," just as Adorno did: for the man to whom Homer's *Odyssey* is "one of the earliest representative testimonies of Western bourgeois civilisation,"<sup>49</sup> the "bourgeois era" is plainly synonymous with "life."

## Footnotes

1. T. W. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening", p. 158
2. Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, "Dialectic of Enlightenment": Continuum, New York 1972, p. 121.
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*, p. 123
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*, p. 161
7. *ibid.*, p. 134
8. *ibid.*, p. 36
9. *ibid.*, p. 121
10. *ibid.*, p. 134
11. Jean Baudrillard, "For a Critique of the Political

Economy of the Sign": Telos Press, St. Louis 1981, p. 181

12. *ibid.*, p. 176
13. *ibid.*, p. 183
14. *ibid.*, p. 179
15. Horkheimer and Adorno: *op. cit.*, p. 127
16. Baudrillard *op. cit.*, p. 172
17. Adorno: *op. cit.*, p. 278
18. *ibid.*
19. ed. Anderson et al., "Aesthetics and Politics": New Left Books, London 1977, p. 125
20. Baudrillard: *op. cit.*, p. 176
21. J. Tunstall, "The Media Are American": p. 70
22. *ibid.*, p. 59
23. Horkheimer and Adorno: *op. cit.*, p. 123
24. Tunstall: *op. cit.*, p. 172
25. Raymond Williams, "Television: Technology and Cultural Form": Fontana, London 1974, p. 127-8
26. Baudrillard: *op. cit.*, p. 172
27. ed. Anderson et al.: *op. cit.*, p. 122
28. *ibid.*, p. 121-2
29. In the period when he was working on *Das Kapital* Marx noted, and praised, Darwin's repudiation of teleology in the field of the natural sciences, and his own non-teleological account of the development of class society represents a crucial break with the tradition of utopian socialism.
30. T. W. Adorno, quoted by Joseph Horowitz, "Understanding Toscanini": Knopf, New York 1987, p. 240. Horowitz's book, which is in essence an obsessively extended recapitulation (across no less than 500 pages) of Adorno's fulminations against this great musician, provides further striking evidence of the inexhaustible appeal of the Frankfurt version of Marxism for bourgeois letters.
31. Adorno's refusal, or inability, to provide any basis for his critical judgments in the analysis of actual works is one of the most characteristic features of his writings on "the culture of industry."
32. Adorno addresses himself at length to the embarrassment of Wagnerian opera in "In Search of Wagner" (New Left Books, London 1980).
33. Adorno: *op. cit.*, p. 298-9
34. *ibid.*
35. *ibid.*, p. 284
36. ed. James Curran et al., "Mass Communication and Society": Edward Arnold, London 1984, p. 388
37. *ibid.*, p. 391
38. *ibid.*, p. 388
39. *ibid.*, p. 389
40. *ibid.*, p. 389
41. *ibid.*, p. 399
42. *ibid.*, p. 397
43. ed. Anderson et al.: *op. cit.*, p. 140
44. ed. Curran et al.: *op. cit.*, p. 388
45. *ibid.*, p. 390
46. *ibid.*
47. Adorno: *op. cit.*, p. 275
48. *ibid.*
49. Horkheimer and Adorno: *op. cit.*, p. xvi









Lydia Lunch in *Fingered*

# Right Wing Chic

**ADAM PARFREY**

**& R. KERN**

**FINGERED**

by Bryan Bruce

"... the most refreshing art or tracts I've seen lately have been from clinical schizophrenics and racist revolutionaries. Their avenging monomania powerfully transcends the wan self-pity and hair splittings of the status quo. When reason and enlightenment ignore and perpetuate the monstrosity of a fatally poisoned earth, monstrous proposals may be the only way to get anyone to listen, to face the hard facts of our imminent demise."

Adam Parfrey  
*Apocalypse Culture*<sup>1</sup>

"If you have a black guy in a movie and he does something stupid you run the risk of being called a racist... Due to the feminist movement any reflection on, of, or about woman is going to be judged more critically than the same reflection about men. It's purely a matter of hypersensitivity. For example you would think everyone at the Village Voice was a Black, gay, Jewish woman — such is their degree of hypersensitivity to certain subjects."

Richard Kern  
*Film Threat* #3<sup>2</sup>

"Naturally, we couldn't care in the least if people are involved in explicit sexual representation (after all, we're pornographers ourselves), as long as it doesn't mirror the oppressive and entrenched value system of culture at large."

The New Lavender Panthers



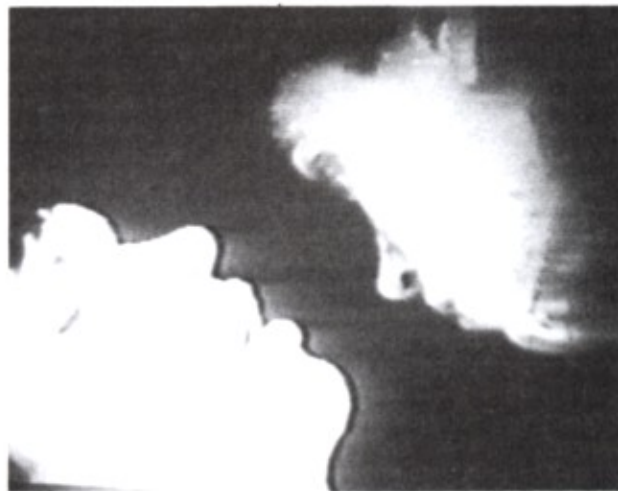
This article is a response to the films of Richard Kern, specifically, *The Manhattan Love Suicides* and *The Right Side of My Brain* (both 1985), *Submit To Me, Submit To Me Now*, and *Fingered* (all 1986), and the Sonic Youth video *Death Valley '69*, which he co-directed, and which is much better than the films. I hesitated to dig up these tired old relics (it's surprising how dated they already seem), partly because I didn't relish the prospect of sitting through them again, and partly because I didn't want to give him the publicity — particularly negative publicity, which, as R. Kern well knows, is the very best kind. But his films bring up a lot of issues that I've been wanting to talk about, so with much effort I suffered through the lot, comforting myself with the thought that once I finished the article I would never have to watch another R. Kern film as long as I live.

As you may have already gathered, I'm not a fan. R. Kern has been quoted

as saying, "the only philosophy I have is to try not to be boring"<sup>1</sup> — a modest credo on which to base one's life, and yet I find myself unable to sit through five minutes of an R. Kern film (thankfully most of them don't exceed thirty) without losing complete interest, and not wanting even to bother watching them on fast forward. It's not easy to make movies almost exclusively about sex and violence so boring, but this, apparently, is Kern's art. Desperately seeking subject matter that will shock and provoke, and (falsely) assuming that the most radical position is necessarily the most excessive, Kern does, of course, cause a certain commotion at left-infested film fests — that's only to be expected, and it's probably the best use his films could ever be put to anyway. But thanks to the ever-expanding video market, Kern's largest audience is most likely divided between a bunch of creepy heterosexual men who like to see women degraded despite the irritation of a distracting, arty camera style, and

creepy heterosexual men who like to see women degraded especially when legitimized by a distracting, arty camera style. This formula also applies to his creepy heterosexual male 'underground' following, who may feel somehow exempt from considerations of sexism by virtue of their (largely self-imposed) marginalization, but who are actually more loathsome because they should know better.

Of course, R. Kern can be perceived as some kind of underground 'anti-hero' because he fulfils all the prerequisites: a) He has a blanket contempt for everyone and everything (why, he's almost cynical!) and therefore can't be accused of being merely homophobic and misogynist — he hates everyone, why should women and fags feel special in their victimization? (The same logic in reverse allows him to present gleefully homosexuality and female sadism as equally disgusting and filthy as more run-of-the-mill heterosexual aberrations.)



Clockwise from top left: *Manhattan Love Suicides*, *Death Valley '69* (Sonic Youth video), *Fingered*, Nick Zedd in *Manhattan Love Suicides*



tions.) b) He's politically incorrect. Like all those gore-film aficionados who love to see women sliced and diced as a politically incorrect gesture, conveniently masking their actual enjoyment of it, Kern revels in controversial depictions of s&m and the sexual debasement of women. I personally have nothing against gore films, but I find it impossible to enjoy one thoroughly unless the male victims outnumber the female by at least two to one. This, of course, varies according to context, but it is a good general rule of thumb. (Castration scenes also help.) Neither do I have anything against s&m, as long as it is lesbian or homosexual, or, if heterosexual, the woman is in the sadistic role. I'm not saying the male heterosexual sadist doesn't have the right to represent himself or to be represented, I'm merely saying it's ugly. It's ugly in a culture which promotes, encourages, and, finally, fetishizes male dominance. 'Political incorrectness' can be useful as a reaction against uptight liberals who seek to erect an establishment on the left. But Kern's notion of anti-leftist political incorrectness is to be a slut for the right by sensationalizing all the more disgusting aspects of heterosexual normalcy, particularly male machismo and female victimization — we've all seen it before in living colour, who needs it on the small screen in black and white in the basement of some hipper-than-thou white punk on dope? c) He's 'authentic.' So he's allegedly a junkie and he lives (—ed?) in the East Village. 'Street credibility' (he forced me to use the term) doesn't count if you have to prove this hard you have it.

All insults aside, Kern's films are good for something — they warn us of a recent 'trend' in the (for lack of a better word) underground towards the acceptance of the most reactionary principles in the name of free expression, "aesthetic terrorism," and transgression. 'The Left,' as a great, lumbering, institutionalized albatross, has become an object of derision for its inability to effect any real change, and deservedly so, but instead of abandoning altogether the obsolete notion of a binary, objective division of political affiliation, this new kind of 'revolutionary' has found a cosy exile on the extreme right. In some instances it might be construed (to be generous) as a case of going so far left that they're right — the line Adam Parfrey, for example, might try to feed you. As exemplified by the above quotation from his most unlovely book *Apocalypse Culture*, Parfrey would have us believe that once a good liberal, only as

a last resort in this ugly, ugly world has he turned to the teachings of neo- (and not so neo-) Nazis. In the case of Richard Kern, his residence on the right, judging by his manifest fear of feminism (not to mention racial politics — his films are as white as Wonderbread), seems more like the discovery of a latent tendency, a 'coming out': I'm sure he's always hated women deep down, but could he ever have dreamed in his wildest imagination that it would actually become 'hip' in the '80s to be a right wing bigot? A most irritating similarity between the opening quotes from Parfrey and Kern is the whining tone, particular to certain straight white males, of craving attention. It goes something like this: "All those left wing bitches and fags are getting all the sympathy, so I'll be a bad boy and then they'll have to pay attention to me." In their own sick, little minds, these poor boys become the persecuted ones, and can't accept it when we tell them that there is just not room left for them on the cross. It's the new sensitivity, for men.

While the best policy, generally, is to ignore these cry-babies, when their cries for help become as sinister as those of Kern and Parfrey, attention must be paid, if only to shut them up. So I propose to examine these two specimens more closely, bearing in mind, as the New Lavender Panthers sensibly remind us, that extreme action is not always revolutionary, nor is revolution always served best by what may only appear, superficially, to be extreme.

**Could he ever have dreamed in his wildest imagination  
that it would actually become 'hip' in the '80s to be a right wing  
bigot? A most irritating similarity between the opening quotes from  
Parfrey and Kern is the whining tone, particular to certain straight  
white males, of craving attention.**

*Apocalypse Culture* is an evil little anthology riding the crest of the post-modernist vogue to dress up tired old reactionary ideologies in new state-of-the-art packaging. Keeping in mind that post-modernism (the ultimate ism) is both nostalgic in its evaluation of the past and cosmetic in its installation of the future, Parfrey's vision of the world in *Apocalypse Culture* is nothing if not post-modernism 'par excellence,' despite his (too many) protestations. (Par-

frey spends much of his time accusing others of crimes of which he is, himself, manifestly guilty: accusing a couple of (other) postmodern artists of "hip cynicism" is a good one, for example.) First attacking the avant-garde for its failure to threaten action outside of the constraints of the art world (okay so far), Parfrey then goes on to champion those who, in his opinion, do, harking to "the true outsiders and not the would-be insiders for an artist capable of effective counter-terror against the insidious mantras of consumerist brainwash."<sup>4</sup> Out of this pseudo-situationist rhetoric we may gather that Parfrey is bestowing upon us sacred access to the "true outsiders" who can change the world. Included in his anthology: words of wisdom from Adolf Hitler (who needs no introduction), the Process (a murderous satanic cult splintered from the ever-reliable Church of Scientology) and Peter Sotos of *Pure* magazine (a child pornographer who insists women should be treated like dogs). Bear in mind that their avenging monomania powerfully transcends the wan self-pity and hair splittings of the status quo. Also for our edification, a defence of eugenics ("The Orphaned Science," Poor science!) by Parfrey himself, and (purely coincidentally, I'm sure) an article claiming the anti-Christ will be a black man (shades of Helter Skelter!). It's not much of a stretch to extrapolate an ultra-right wing, neo-fascist agenda behind *Apocalypse Culture*; the question is, how seriously is it to be taken?

It's very trendy in certain quarters of the alternative press to champion the likes of, say, Charles Manson, or John Wayne Gacy. For some, the appeal is almost, shall we say, anthropological, or at least detached; for others, it becomes increasingly fetishized as shock value collapses into loving adoration, and an interest in that which sets you apart consumes you. And this is where the danger beings. A healthy interest in John Wayne Gacy, or wearing a Man-



son t-shirt just for fun is one thing; looking up to them as 'heroes of the revolution' is something else altogether. I don't want to linger on these particular examples (although Manson acolytes should check out Maury Terry's *The Ultimate Evil* in which he suggests that Charlie was less some avenging, monomaniacal guru than a mere pawn in the high stakes, capitalist drug trade), but to make an obvious point, this romance with serial killers and right wing terrorists avowed by such self-proclaimed counter-culture revolutionaries as Parfrey is the ultimate pretense of the ineffectual artist struggling to overcome his own impotence (I use the masculine pronoun on purpose because it's mostly a boys' club type of thing), and offers a convenient pretext for the dissemination of racist and sexist ideologies. While the rest of us sit around "splitting hairs" about such small potatoes causes as feminism and gay rights, Parfrey gets right to the meat of things, praising "anti-social sadists" and "psychotic outsiders" for their "aesthetic purity," those great artists who, presumably, are too busy stalking victims or distributing hate literature to bother themselves with more practical and mundane issues.

A closer look at Parfrey's mini-manifesto "Aesthetic Terrorism" reveals the tenets of the new 'right wing chic' I'm talking about. His lexicon is riddled with the tell-tale words and catchphrases of the fascist aesthete: the "aesthetic purity" of psycho killers; the "elegant chiaroscuro (Yikes!!) of light and dark" of a '30s Nazi propaganda flyer featuring Hitler and Christ as anti-Semitic brethren; the "dark poetry" of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (Oh, brother! Has he been reading Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style*?) which inspired John Hinckley to shoot the president in an "outburst of Nietzschean heroism," embodying the "Byronic model of poetry and action"; and let's not forget (from the opening quotation) the "avenging monomania" which "transcends" the status quo. "Poetry," "Nietzschean," "transcend," "purity," "elegant": you don't have to be Leni Riefenstahl to figure out the fascist agenda behind these words. Reprinting (not very clever) poems by John Hinckley Jr. and Charles Manson, Parfrey extols these 'heroes' as modern "Romantics," as having reached "states of internal illumination," and of having achieved a "revelation." The religious overtones are ominous enough, especially considering his (also very trendy) flirtation with various satanic cults throughout the book. But even more

irritating is the disgustingly elitist tone, as if Parfrey is assembling those chosen transcendental few to be the vanguard of his apocalyptic revolution. Predictably, he also eschews pop culture (his inclusion of The Society for the Eradication of Television fact-sheet, for example), appealing to those high-minded, enlightened individuals who refuse to be contaminated by the masses.<sup>5</sup>

Part of Parfrey's strategy, of course, and that which has allowed him to have such a wide cross-over appeal to a left-wing market, is his championing of certain carefully chosen political issues which pull at the heart strings of any good liberal. Censorship is the most useful shibboleth for this purpose, reducing the most complex debate to one singular, absolute, moral issue, and thereby acting as a smoke-screen for



those opportunists who know how to manoeuvre political orthodoxy as a spectacular diversion. In order to defend Peter Sotos' most irritating and ugly publication *Pure*, Parfrey predictably raises the spectre of censorship, whining about how this poor, misogynist, homophobic child pornographer is being hounded by 'the authorities.' In an interview with Sotos in *Apocalypse Culture*, Sotos clearly spells out his own beliefs: "Females are dogs whose only worth is as pawns for my pleasure. Almost exclusively, this involves physical violence. Homos are a bit more attractive than women when they're on top but disgusting when they're on bottom." Etcetera. Parfrey tells us that Sotos was nailed and jailed because he "tweaked too many civic-minded noses," and that this visionary "is being tried not for his interest in violence, but

his unhypercritical adulation of it outside media's "safe" venues of pornographic violence in the average comic book, action show, and crime novel." "Mainstream consumer violence," he continues, "is, of course, sanctified by the safety-in-numbers moralizing of "crime-doesn't-pay" or by the sanctifying halo of state-sponsored murder."

There are several operations at work here, all of them ugly. As a clever propagandist, Parfrey knows the value of appealing to his target audience (most likely elitist academics looking for a thrill or disaffiliated 'radicals' searching for a suitably extreme cause) in 'us-against-them' terms. Accordingly, he frames his argument in the context of the persecuted extremist versus the state, the lone voice railing against the "civic-minded," "safety-in-numbers" establishment. From this angle, Sotos is valorized for his fight against the homogenizing consciousness of mass culture (never mind that what he stands for is exactly symptomatic of that same culture). Children, Parfrey points out, are exploited as implicitly sexual fetish objects in mass media (giving us an example in the form of a deconstructed fashion ad that could have come straight out of a feminist quarterly); Sotos merely produces his own child pornography explicitly and without corporate sanction — he's less hypocritical.

Okay, he's a less hypocritical pig. Let's face it — it's ugly either way. Of course independently produced, non-corporate pornography is preferable to the capitalist-motivated, state-sanctioned kind, but when 'underground' porno advocates that women should be treated like dogs and children tortured, I think better examples of independent pornography should (and can) be found. (Particularly those which are produced by and for specific minorities who choose to represent themselves sexually in opposition to that porno (whether corporate or independent) geared to satisfy dominant male fetishes, gay or straight.) Anyone who promotes the likes of Sotos in the name of freedom of speech and anti-censorship is obviously providing a convenient alibi for his own guilty pleasures. I am in no way suggesting that Sotos should be censored, but if the system as it exists shuts him up, I'm certainly not going to complain. Let's be practical. Parfrey pathetically attempts to downplay the seriousness of Sotos' activities (he was only caught with *one* child pornography magazine and only reproduced "one quite disputable



xerox"), and reduces the issues to those terms most attractive to potential left wing supporters: Sotos prosecuted for the mere possession of "controversial material." Indisputably, this state intervention is as disgusting as Sotos' product, but there is something satisfying about sitting back and watching the pigs destroy the swine.

Consider an analogous situation, a widely reported incident (whether it actually happened or not scarcely matters now) in which three strident feminists stormed the projection booth at a screening of R. Kern's *Fingered*, ripped the film from the projector and absconded with the door money on the way out. While some may cry censorship, I call it a good example of direct action. To be so bold as to take the money, the three sisters obviously had a good sense of humour, and made good use of a constructive, scaled-down 'terrorism.' Let's not forget the revolution of every day. When censorship with a capital 'C' becomes an abstract, institutionalized issue obscuring all others, it can easily be manipulated to present the illusion of free expression while in practical terms, actually serving to promote the integrity of the status quo. (Consider the recent constitutional right to burn the US flag, construed by some as an affirmation of American democracy and freedom.) So when Parfrey lovingly quotes Hitler on one page and cries censorship on the next, I just pay him no mind.

Parfrey's book and Kern's films have in common the quality of presenting a dare to the potential leftist audience they so ardently seduce: can you endure the horrors we are revealing to you, you queasy liberals? (My other favourite rationale, which is also an obvious Mansonism, is the 'I am just the mirror of your own ugliness' routine.) There are, however, numerous examples of subterranean pornography and alternative publications which are as extreme, provocative, and revolutionary as anything produced by these boys without a sexist and/or fascist ideology attached, not to mention an absence of macho posturing. *Modern Primitives*, Re/Search publications' most recent product, is an obvious point of comparison for Parfrey's *Apocalypse Culture*, the two works having come out almost simultaneously, and even sharing several subjects (Fakir Musafar, Genesis P-Orridge). Although more specific in its focus (subtitled "An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual," it concentrates on "body modification practices" — tattooing, piercing, and scarification), *Modern Primitives* has in

common with *Apocalypse Culture* a frustration with the complacency of the deadened, mass-produced, and colonized consciousness of a post-modern world (think of zombies), and the desire to sabotage or explode it by breaking taboos and otherwise freeing ourselves from the constraints of 'normal' behaviour. The obvious difference between the two books is the ideological agenda underlying the rhetoric of revolution. For someone who proposes a radical disruption of the world as we know it, Parfrey is, both in his editorial selection and in his own writing, conspicuously conservative in his sexual politics. Someone should tell him that there will be no revolution without sexual revolution; to the majority, being a fag or a feminist is still considered a crime against the state. Parfrey champions the rights of necrophiles (incidentally, she is one of the few women included in his anthology, is exclusively heterosexual, and not particularly feminist) but not homosexuals, even though the dominant ideology (and often the law) considers the two acts equally aberrant and disgusting — if you've ever had a video from the States stopped at the border, you will notice that "necrophilia" and "anal penetration" are equal categories of perversion for censorship purposes. Even more suspicious than the underrepresentation (to put it mildly) of women and homosexuals in his book is the over-representation of straight males whose views on women are, to say the least, archaic. Sotos is one example; the man who worships a "cult of ritually fattened oracular priestesses" in the name of breaking "taboos of the modern Anorexic Western World" is another. A woman claiming the right to present or represent herself how she chooses is not the same as some fool rationalizing a tired fetish by invoking mystic tradition and 'aesthetic terrorism.'

*Modern Primitives* presents a more integrated, sexually diversified model of extreme behaviour, particularly in the more equal participation of women. (It's not difficult to tell that Re/Search is co-published and -edited by a woman, Andrea Juno.) The women included in the anthology are for the most part intelligent and concerned with controlling their own representation; most of the men included are aware of the danger of sexism in such traditionally male-oriented body alteration practices as tattooing. (Jim Ward, for example: "I won't pierce a woman who's obviously just coming because her husband or boyfriend wants it — to me

that's a violation, a subtle form of rape, and I won't be party to that.") Although most of the people interviewed are heterosexual, there is a general tone of acceptance towards bi- and homosexuality — just what you would expect from those involved in 'radical practice.'

Although clearly not a document that can be readily defused or co-opted by the established Left, *Modern Primitives* has an implicit leftist politic that only makes sense for those who are challenging the existing order. The issues it raises, particularly in the areas of the sexual politics of s&m and piercing, are a lot more complex than I've presented them here, but in general it is incomparably more feminist in tone than *Apocalypse Culture*, and unpolluted by proto-fascist rhetoric. And although there are more than enough 'transcendental' references in *Modern Primitives*, they are generally of a more modest and practical nature than the catastrophic, moniacal ones of *Apocalypse Culture* — often more on the level of gestures and actions available to anyone that can come in handy every day to shake things up as opposed to an arcane, elitist philosophy available to the enlightened few.

"It isn't a joke. There's no such thing as a joke."

I suspect Richard Kern's movies aren't meant to be taken very seriously. In fact, according to Kern, it's all a big joke. The problem is, for a comedian, Kern takes himself pretty seriously, as do the people he uses in his films. Like Parfrey, Kern and his 'stars' (particularly Lydia Lunch, Clint Ruin, Henry Rollins, and Nick Zedd) see themselves as 'artists,' not revolutionaries, and tortured ones at that — the worst kind. There is supposed to be some qualitative difference between Kern's 'art' and mere pornography, or between Lunch's 'performance art' and the output of a sex trade worker. There is a big difference. Kern and Lunch are presenting extreme and explicit sexuality with the ironic distance that only art — especially postmodern art — affords, and in so doing put themselves in the traditional position of the avant-garde: smug, superior, and well beyond the banal sexual materiality — private or professional — of the average person. The joke is that to the untrained eye, there is no difference, and those who are in on the joke can sit back and ridicule the rest for, what, their humanity. I suppose, their subjectivity. It's really the ultimate contempt for the audience.



Ironic distance can be funny, but not when it's looking down from above.

Easily, Kern's best film is one of his first — *The Manhattan Love Suicides*, actually four fables about suicide strung together (*Stray Dogs*, *Woman at the Wheel*, *Thrust In Me* (made with Nick Zedd), and *I Hate You Now*). These mini-movies are more playful than his other work, and the irony is not completely hermetic, allowing a certain amount of identification with characters and situations. As parables, there's a not unwelcome 'moral' or prescriptive tone to the narratives, as if he actually has something useful to say about 'the human condition.' In fact, he almost comes across as a Lower East Side O'Henry.

Of course, we can't ask for too much. We are well prepared for his later forays into misogynist and homophobic terri-

destructive and pathetic is probably not so accidental. The same can be said for the representation of women in the episode that follows, *Woman at the Wheel*. A woman in a car picks up and discards her various boyfriends, complaining all the while about how much she hates them; after being harrassed by four violent young 'punks' she first fantasizes being naked with them in an orgy in the back seat, then suicidally runs her car into a brick wall. A kind of warm-up for *Fingered*, it's more interesting because it's told from the point of view of the woman being victimized, who actually does get rid of her creepy boyfriends rather than just incessantly whine about them. I suppose if you wanted to you could argue for a feminist reading, although Kern's solution for the victimization of women seems to be limited to their self-destruction.

As usual, Kern opts for the obvious shock rather than explore the more meaningfully disturbing implications of his flirtation with perverse sexuality. Leave it to these boys to make transvestism and androgyny look macho.

*I Hate You Now*, the final segment, is an updated O'Henry type narrative: a young woman in love with a muscled, tattooed man with a severely mangled face (more cheap gore movie effects) burns her face with an iron to bond herself with him, only to have him reject her. He strangles himself with his weights; she sets herself on fire in the frying pan she earlier used to cook his fried eggs. This is about as close to a 'political' statement Kern will ever make: the American flag significantly placed behind the weight-lifting macho man, the housewife destroying herself with her own household products. It's probably the best thing Kern's done on film.

*The Right Side of My Brain*, also made in 1985, introduces Lydia Lunch as Kern's favourite screen siren, and finds Kern suddenly posturing humourlessly as some bad-ass filmmaker. I'm not going to dwell on Lydia Lunch's obvious punk 'credentials' that everyone always keeps dragging out to defend her. Her voice-over narration for this film, which I'm sure she wrote, is pathetic and clichéd enough as it is ("it wasn't the agony, it was the ecstasy"; "no rest for the dreary"; "I yearn for everything bad and ugly and self-destructive"), but to have it accompanied by Lydia being conquered by one ugly, sneering musician after another is too much to bear. Lydia is, in turn, threatened with a rifle at her cunt, beat up, forced to give a blow-job to creepy Clint Ruin, beat up again by Henry Rollins, and finally, as if she hasn't been through enough, has to make out with another woman. There can be nothing redemptive about any character in a Richard Kern movie; having sex at the end with a woman is merely one perversion Lydia has to endure to prove how low she can sink. (The 'lesbian' antics exploited in Kern's films have the same quality as the woman-to-woman action presented in Penthouse or certain Russ Meyer movies, i.e., obviously coded for the pleasure of the heterosexual male voyeur. Kern would no doubt take this comparison as a compliment. Believe me, it's not.) Even innocent victims in Kern's films have to be corrupt — the little boy Lydia saves from a child-beating Henry sneaks a look at her breasts as Mr. Rollins has his way with her.



*Death Valley '69*

tory. The first segment, *Stray Dogs*, concerns a young gay male who is obsessed with an older, presumably bisexual painter who is first seen window-shopping with a young woman. The young man, who looks and acts like a crazed zombie, becomes so enraged with jealousy that later in the painter's apartment he literally comes apart at the seams and explodes, spurring blood everywhere. Applying cheap gore effects to a small scale 'love' story somehow works, although looking at Kern's movies as a whole, the depiction of gay characters as monstrously self-

*Thrust In Me* has fellow underground film-maker Nick Zedd in the dual role of a surly, sneering young man stalking the streets and a young woman about to slit her wrists, the two intercut until the guy comes home to find his girlfriend dead in the bathtub. Again, the humour kind of works, with the girl reading "How To Be Your Own Best Friend," and the guy hanging around outside a "Unisex" hair salon, but ultimately nothing really interesting is done with the potentially sexually transgressive scenario — Zedd merely fucks himself as the dead girl in the mouth and comes.



*Fingered*, made a year later, and co-written by Lunch, has all the same ingredients as *The Right Side of My Brain* minus the voice-over narration, and with a twist added: Lydia is a phone sex worker who says things like, "You can talk to Mommy after you give her the credit card number and expiration date." This veneer of social commentary is soon abandoned as she hooks up with another ugly long-hair with tattoos who eventually fists her, fucks her with a gun, and murders any guy who tries to get a piece of the action. Lydia screams and squeals her disapproval of his macho behaviour, while beckoning him to "drill his fat juicy cock" into her "tight greasy hole." "Make me fucking come you fucking pig," she whines as he fingers and fucks her. On the road in his car in the middle of a crime spree, Lunch comes up with some feminist bon mots like "I'm sick of your macho bullshit" and "It's your cock I like, it's your fucking bullshit I can't stand," which basically sums up the Lunch philosophy. Finally picking up a hitch-hiker (Lung Leg) who has just been raped, Lydia starts slapping her and calling her a "fucking little bitch." The car stopped, Lunch slams her some more and holds her down as her boyfriend jerks off on the bewildered victim and then beats her up in a way that doesn't look too simulated. Finally, their rampage is interrupted by the police.

With these two films, Lunch and Kern manage to reduce the counter-culture to exactly those terms which can be most easily dismissed — misguided, unfocussed rebellion without any basis in a material social or political context. Predictably, there is never any real sexual transgression in Kern's films either; he merely dresses up culturally determined male sexual empowerment and female victimization in punk clothing, and not even very 'authentic' clothing at that. Kern's masculine ideal — the lean, mean hard fighting, hard fucking dude with long hair, tattoos, and a black motorcycle jacket, has more to do with the biker or heavy metal image than punk, the kind of image desperate artists contrive, which is about all Kern could aspire to. In other words, he's a poser.

For those of you who are still trying to construe Lydia Lunch's tired old routine as 'feminist,' I suggest you listen to her latest spoken-word album and compact disc, "Oral Fixation." On it, she continues her endless tirade against those horrible, abusive men to whom she seems to have unlimited access. You can never quite tell whether Lydia

Lunch is mocking or worshipping male machismo; the problem is, neither can she. Well, it doesn't matter anyway. Lydia informs us, because "I'm terminally fucked up," "I hate myself and I hate everyone else too," "I don't fuckin' want to understand anything anymore," and "I don't want to know nothing I already don't know." This is the kind of wisdom Lunch packages, markets, and profits from, and in this sense, you could call her a successful businesswoman. She's postfeminist, I'll give her that.

Kern, too, packages a shallow, cosmetically transgressive image, which is marketable precisely because it doesn't challenge or threaten anything beyond its obvious and easily ignored pose — like Jim Jarmusch on a bad acid trip. Kern's remaining two films, *Submit To Me* and *Submit To Me Two*, both made in 1986, make this pose even more apparent by stripping away the narrative pretext and simply presenting image after image of the New York underground brat pack discarding their clothes, masturbating, and pretending to perform sadistic and masochistic acts. The camera spins, tilts, and zooms quickly in and out; the editing is erratic and jumpy; Butthole Surfers music plays in the background. This makes it at least more diverting than his other films, but not much more substantial. More interesting is his video for the Sonic Youth/Lydia Lunch song "Death Valley '69," co-directed by Judith Barry and Sonic Youth, which uses some of the same images from the "Submit to Me" films. The video starts out with a group of people at target practice in an open field, followed by an accelerated, hand-held shot through the various rooms of a dilapidated house showing the slaughtered victims of a mass murder. This is followed by a barrage of images — from bombs dropping to '60s protest footage to mushroom clouds — intercut with Lung Leg scowling and spitting at police and playing with a switch-blade in a crowd of people, as well as live band footage. As a 'rock video,' it works well by going far beyond what is generally expected of the medium, i.e., the in'60s taking on new meaning when spliced together with the '80s footage of Sonic Youth playing insanely and Lung Leg slashing the air with a knife. Even the record album thrown like a frisbee and shot to resemble UFO footage has a certain complexity of meaning found nowhere else in Kern's work. But then again, the video seems much more a product of Sonic Youth than of R. Kern.

I'm tired of talking about Richard Kern's stupid films, but I wanted to finish off by briefly comparing his films to Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1988), a movie which has found a similar underground video market and has also created a certain brouhaha at film festivals, particularly among feminists. Haynes uses Barbie dolls to recreate the rise and fall of Karen Carpenter, but also incorporates an interview format and feminist text about anorexia to provide a context for his elaborate 'joke.' Some feminists have misconstrued the film (which was co-written and produced by a woman) as misogynist in its depiction of Karen, but what they have failed to understand is the film's ability to be simultaneously critical and affectionate towards its subject, to deconstruct Karen Carpenter, but also to identify with her dilemma. Haynes is able to do this because he is assured in his sexual difference (he's openly gay), and can therefore be comfortably female-identified, and also because he understands camp and how it can be used somewhat effectively if politicized. None of these concepts are even remotely familiar to Kern. He can't understand that ironic distance does not presuppose contempt and superiority; he can't understand that it is possible to identify with female victimization beyond merely presenting their gross objectification; he can't understand that an expression of sexual difference or transgression has little to do with the clinical, detached presentation of extreme sexual behaviour. And affection, I think, is not part of Kern's lexicon. That's why R. Kern's Deathtrip movies have little value beyond a limited fetish appeal to those who have reduced sexuality to its most vacuous and demeaning terms. But weep not for Richard Kern; he's in a band now called the Black Snakes, and living off residuals, or something.

## Notes

- 1 Adam Parfrey, *Apocalypse Culture*, New York, Amok Press, 1987, p. 123
- 2 *Film Threat* #13, ed. Christian Gore, p. 53
- 3 *Loc cit*
- 4 Adam Parfrey, "Aesthetic Terrorism," *Apocalypse Culture*, pp. 115-123
- 5 *Loc cit*
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 127
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 117
- 8 *Modern Primitives*, eds. V. Vale & Andrea Juno, San Francisco, Re/Search Publications, 1989, p. 161
- 9 Joe Orton, *The Orton Diaries*, ed. John Lahr, New York, Harper and Row, 1988, p. 187.



# Holy Men In The Wilderness



by Deborah Root

## The Mission and Sainte Marie

**T**he ruses of colonialist representation are generally obvious in the way they produce an 'image' of subject peoples and cultures. Less obvious is the relationship of representations of colonial encounters or histories to the various levels of violence that accompany these encounters.

Literature and films produced in the colonizing countries have traditionally treated the colonial project both as a grand adventure for the (European) individuals involved and as a noble struggle against 'darkness' or 'barbarism.' The violence that (continues to)

underlies and supports the civilizing mission has not as a rule been treated explicitly except in so far as it functions as a backdrop to the action of the narrative.

Yet occasionally a film or novel appears that addresses a particular historical event in terms of colonial violence, for instance, it may describe a massacre, or the effects of an unjust decision, or illustrate an instance of mistreatment, and so forth. While these films are 'about' colonial violence, they utilize a narrative structure that elides the layers of complicities inherent in the

colonial project as a whole, and elides the way these complicities intersect with explicit acts or events of violence. This narrativization of violence into a specific event makes possible a redemption of the colonial project; violence appears as an aberration, and is represented as something that exists outside of the 'real' aim of the civilizing mission. This partial confession to violence was always part of the ideology of the civilizing mission, and becomes precisely what reinforces the notion that the colonial project involved a genuine effort to ameliorate the lot of the 'natives.'





Jeremy Irons in *The Mission*

## Among the Hurons

This confession to violence and redemption or rehabilitation of the colonial project would seem to reproduce a profoundly Christian narrative, a narrative that structures films such as Roland Joffe's *The Mission* and the educational audio-visual presentation shown at the Ontario tourist site in Midland, *Sainte-Marie among the Hurons*. Both *The Mission* and *Sainte-Marie* address the history of the Jesuit missionary endeavour in the 'New World,' in particular the historical events surrounding the violent destruction of each mission. At *Sainte-Marie* the visitor is

instructed by an hour-long slide presentation that recounts the history of the site, the tensions between the Jesuits and various factions of native society, and the abandonment of the site in 1649.<sup>1</sup> The Society of Jesus was involved in both productions: Joffe worked closely with Jesuit advisors while making *The Mission*, and the reconstructed site of the Sainte-Marie mission continues to be linked to the Jesuit organization in the area (the site itself is overlooked by the church commemorating the martyrdom of Jean de Brébeuf, the patron saint of Canada,

and was recently visited by Pope Paul II).

While *The Mission* functions most obviously as a Hollywood-style adventure-history of the Jesuit mission in Paraguay in the 18th century, it remains an extremely Christian film. To address questions of colonial violence from within a structure of confession and redemption is, of course, a way of talking about colonial violence that predates decolonization and neocolonialism, predates 19th-century jingoism, and indeed is apparent in the earliest missionary activities undertaken by reli-



gious orders during the European conquest of North and South America. The Jesuits and Franciscans have always articulated their role as protectors of the 'natives,' protecting them both from the oppression resulting from their spiritual ignorance, and the oppression caused by the activities of the European settlers and various secular institutions. Hence the antiquated or archaic quality of *The Mission*, which presents the Jesuit endeavour unproblematically, and the friars' attempts to convert the Guarani in a wholly positive light. The *Sainte-Marie* material was recently rewritten to reflect (in the words of their representative) "greater sensitivity," and touches upon the negative effects of the presence of the mission on Huron (properly, Wendat) society. Yet at *Sainte-Marie* the Jesuits' intentions with respect to the Wendat remain benign, and accordingly the new material is able to remain

about and they consequently appear much more opaque and 'different' than the Jesuits. The viewer is meant to look at the Guarani characters from the position of a European, preferably a nice European but in any case one who affirms a radical difference between herself and the unintelligible, painted 'native.' Again, *The Mission* manifests an antiquated or archaic quality, for in other such films being made today there is usually at least a pretence of presenting something presumed to be the 'native's point of view,' as *Sainte-Marie*.

Indeed, utilizing another old trope, *The Mission* seems overtly to identify the Guarani with nature. In both this film and in the *Sainte-Marie* presentation the friars struggle against a vast, untamed landscape in which the indigenous inhabitants exist as part of that environment, that is, in a state of nature, naked by missionary standards and

but with great exertion and difficulty.

*The Mission's* use of music reiterates the distinction between nature and culture, a partition given ontological status by European theologians long before Levi-Strauss. Here, the distinction may be recognized immediately: flute music stands for nature; choral music — that is, the human voice — stands for culture. Indeed, in the beginning of the film Jeremy Irons tames the Guarani by playing a flute; after his struggle against the falls, the missionary plays his instrument as dark, apparently curious shapes move in. An angry Guarani breaks the flute, but another attempts to mend it and holds it out to the Jesuit, smiling (again, because of the film's refusal to translate the language, the motivations of the Guarani remain obscure<sup>1</sup>). Later, when Robert De Niro experiences true remorse for the first time (this achieved through penance), the camera focusses on his weeping face as the flute music is replaced by choral singing. The flute does not disappear from the narrative, however: De Niro's reading of inspirational literature is accompanied by happy flute music.

European music becomes the evidence around which the Guarani's capacity for culture is argued and affirmed. A papal emissary must decide whether the Paraguayan missions are to survive, and to support the case the Jesuits for the missions present to the emissary a naked Guarani boy singing a Christian hymn in perfect Latin, a juxtaposition of apparent opposites designed to evoke wonder. The emissary visits several missions, and sees orderly, peaceful communities peopled by clothed, industrious Guarani. As the emissary is shown a violin workshop at one mission, religious choral music swells piously. At Jeremy Irons' jungle mission, the flute returns as the emissary exclaims that the site is "the garden of Eden"; but the choir is soon heard as the emissary views the friars' good works (one of which seems to involve ensuring that women are properly clothed). Violins and choral music become the highest expression of the Western ethos as the Guarani are 'brought to' European culture in the film, and shown capable of experiencing the sublimity and loftiness of the Christian message.

If religious music is juxtaposed against nature (or the Guarani in their natural state), it also stands against the violence and oppression resulting from the activities of secular Europeans in the colony. As the mission is about to be attacked by Portuguese soldiers, the



Jeremy Irons in *The Mission*

within the traditional narrative of the religious orders.

*The Mission's* emphasis on the virtue of the Jesuits and the benevolence of their activities with respect to the 'natives' situates the Guarani as inchoate, unformed cultural matter, existing only as inert recipients of the Christian message. Unlike the missionaries and other Europeans, individual Guarani are never named in the film. All Europeans, whether Portuguese or Spanish, speak English, yet the Guarani language is never rendered into English (Jeremy Irons briefly interprets in one scene). To a non-Guarani-speaking viewer of the film, the Guarani appear constantly to be gibbering incomprehensibly: we have absolutely no idea what they are talking

apparently without intelligible language. The Christian struggle against a harsh land becomes a struggle against savagery and idolatry, an identification made explicit in missionary writings.<sup>2</sup> Both narratives open with panoramas of the landscape, the savagery or pristine nature of which is reiterated in the presentations: at *Sainte-Marie* it is noted this landscape was "untouched by Europeans since the beginning of time" and *The Mission* dramatically uses the landscape as the frame and instrument of a Jesuit's martyrdom. Jeremy Irons' initial tasks involve climbing to the top of a high system of waterfalls, and winning the trust of the hostile Guarani, the same people who martyred his brother Jesuit; both are completed successfully



flute plays low, ominous tones; soon, the soldiers open fire as Jeremy Irons and his flock sing Latin hymns. Everyone dies to swelling choral music. At the end of the film, a naked Guarani girl explores the empty, gutted mission before she slips away into the forest by canoe. The music is, of course, the flute, which continues as the papal emissary expresses guilt and remorse for the decision he made that destroyed the mission, reminding us of the consequences of worldly self-interest. Thus nature collapses into the category that also contains venal self-interest, massacre and slavery, all of which are to be struggled against by the church as manifestations of 'wild' or 'savage' impulses; and with this the traditional Christian view that non-Christian peoples are dupes of the devil, and their societies the fruit of his work, is invoked and underlined in this film. We recall that Jeremy Irons played a flute to gain the Guarani's trust, which was necessary in order to convert them; he is able to do so because 'nature' in the hands of men of proper Christian spirit can be useful for good, and ultimately can be turned against itself and subdued.

Because nature has been set up to represent 'savagery' and violence, the narrative structure of the film renders it impossible for the Guarani to flee the mission and hide in the forest when the slow-moving Portuguese soldiers arrive to kill them. There would seem to be no alternative to massacre. The question of abandoning the mission is raised at one point by the papal emissary, but Jeremy Irons immediately precludes it by telling him that the Guarani will not leave the mission because "it is their home"; he reiterates this by telling the emissary that the Guarani "do not want to go back into the forest because the devil lives there" (we note that this apparent fear of the forest would have had to have developed in the Guarani converts in less than one generation, and this wholly on the word of the Jesuits). Here the Guarani are situated as victims (indeed as background to 'larger' issues) or at the very least as a people who must christianize and become European or disappear.

If *The Mission* presents the missionaries unproblematically as protectors of the 'natives' against violence, *Sainte-Marie* is less sanguine about the effects of the Jesuit mission with respect to the way the Christian presence inadvertently (as they suggest) created violent situations. In *The Mission* the friars stood between the Guarani and the Portuguese soldiers; at *Sainte-Marie* it is

regretfully acknowledged that the very presence of the mission brought warfare and disease to the Wendat (the text reads: "Then came the French and with them came death, disease and destruction . . . or so it seemed to many traditional natives," with the omission appearing in the original). The recognition in the revised *Sainte-Marie* material that bad effects can come from good intentions does not disrupt the church's message, but rather becomes a way to preempt the question of Christian sources of colonial violence and add a certain poignancy to the debate on Christian love and responsibility versus anger or resistance. Certainly, we note that in both narratives the violence directed against the 'natives' always appears to come from outside the mission walls (either from specific groups, such as Portuguese or Iroquois soldiers, or from such abstract forces as "famine" or "disease"<sup>4</sup>) and is never shown to occur

within the mission walls (or within the missionary circles), but something that exists outside of the benign aims of the 'good' Europeans. This expression of sadness and remorse on the part of the church or other officials works to displace the cause and trajectory of specific instances of colonial violence, as well as the way this violence is generalized, and accordingly is able to serve as a substitute for the analysis of the so-called 'native traditionals' that it was the missions that brought disease and death. The emissary's voice-over in *The Mission* constantly expresses remorse for the massacre of the Guarani, but this becomes little more than an expression of personal guilt as no alternatives to this massacre are ever presented in the film.

Both *The Mission* or *Sainte-Marie* enforce a linear view of history and in so doing enforce closure on the possibility of a different outcome to the story: within the trajectory of conquest, the 'native' must either become European



A scene from *Sainte-Marie Among the Hurons*

between the missionaries and the Guarani or Wendat.

Indeed, sadness and regret are important in both *The Mission* and *Sainte-Marie* in so far as these emotions are utilized to mark the fundamental benevolence and virtuous intentions of the colonial project; the efforts to destroy traditional societies by both the church and the settlers collapse into other kinds of events, for instance, the destruction of the Jesuit missions. Regret for this destruction transforms confession of error or bad judgement into a retrieval or recovery of the civilizing mission as a whole because it makes colonial violence appear anomalous or accidental, something to be regretted and deplored (regret at gratuitous slaughter was often articulated in colon-

or disappear and 'we Europeans' (and the 'we' of the viewer is always constructed as a European) must remain within European project. This means that the possibility of rejecting the Christian message, of dissolving into the forest, of 'going native,' or of resistance is rendered impossible by the narrative structure of these films. This history has already been decided, the pale Galilean has won; accordingly, time cannot flow backwards, and 'we' must not backslide, regress, devolve, become barbarian. This is reiterated again and again. And so, the Guarani (and the Jesuits) cannot be permitted to escape into invisibility in the forest.

If escape is foreclosed, the only answer would seem to be martyrdom, a very Christian solution to the problem



of colonial violence. This is what is presented in *The Mission*, where Guarani and Jesuit deaths are sanctified by religious hymns. While depicting 'natives' as victimized martyrs would seem to reverse the formerly popular representations of 'Indians' scalping or otherwise brutally massacring white people, the 'new' representations nevertheless continue to reproduce the couplet 'native'/death. And this becomes an extremely brutal form of pacification, of denying movement or any refusal of the European, Christian message, here occurring at the level of representation. No one is allowed off the train.

Because time can only move in one direction in films like *The Mission*, the narratives seem inexorably to move towards the destruction of the 'native' *qua* traditional culture. It is the erasure of cultural difference — and under whose orders — that is at stake here. While this too is seemingly deplored, repression and industrialization, labour and submission are naturalized are made to seem inevitable. Traditional life, if represented at all, becomes nothing more than an idyllic pause or

hiatus which the viewer can look upon with a sense of regret. Again, the structure of *The Mission* and *Sainte-Marie* effaces the possibility of another end to the story of colonialism; indeed, the narrative structure directs the viewer's attention away from a deviation or reversal of the machine we call 'European historical time' and thus locks 'us' (and here 'us' must include everyone) into a particular historical trajectory as well. There would seem to be no way out.

But while the Christian narrative of *The Mission* and *Sainte-Marie* wants to efface the possibility of a way out, a small aperture remains. The *Sainte-Marie* text tells us that when things began to go bad at the mission "... the Wendat people scattered, slipping through deep forests and across distant hills, seeking safety." We recall *The Mission* ends with a naked Guarani walking away from the ruins of the destroyed mission. The film is trying to tell us that without the church humankind will revert to nature. This bears thinking about: perhaps the lessons of these productions concern not Christian faith but rather questions of escape. Perhaps it is time to run away, renounce the project,

avoid martyrdom and flee the purview of powerful religious and cultural institutions.

## Notes

1. The slide show is designed to orient the viewer to the site; indeed, at the end of the presentation the screen retracts and an actor dressed as a Jesuit greets the visitors. *Sainte-Marie* itself has actors dressed as priests, lay workers, and natives (native actors are employed), much to the evident delight of some Europeans who were excited at meeting 'real Indians.' The visitors wander through the site and speak to the actors about their activities, such as carpentry or basket weaving, before arriving at the site's museum and cafeteria.
2. Not only in missionary writings. The 1961 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* writes in the entry on Jean de Brebeuf: "Brebeuf laboured for fifteen years in bestial surroundings trying to civilize the savages."
3. There are a range of reasons why the Guarani or Wendat might be interested by the missions, which are effaced in these narratives.
4. Violence is also sometimes thought to be a consequence of 'history'; recall Jameson's notorious remark "history is what hurts."

# BACKISSUES AVAILABLE

- |                                      |                          |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Neglected Films of the '80s       |                          |
| 2. Women in Contemporary Hollywood   |                          |
| 3/4. Reading the Text (double issue) |                          |
| 5. Alternative Cinema                |                          |
| 7. Stars                             |                          |
| 8. Revaluation                       |                          |
| 9. Comedy                            |                          |
| 10. Sex                              |                          |
| 11. Godard                           |                          |
| 12. Teen Films                       | 16. Canadian Cinema      |
| 13/14. Film Noir (double issue)      | 17. Re:Positioning       |
| 15. Interpretation                   | 18. Imperialism and Film |



**\$4 POSTPAID PER ISSUE, EXCEPT 3/4, 13/14 - \$8**

**CineAction!**  
705-40 Alexander St., Toronto, Ont. M4Y 1B5



# The Last Temptation of Christ:

## A Fragmented Oedipal Trajectory<sup>1</sup>

by Tony Williams

“**W**hat we commonly call masochism is a renovation of that primary tendency as it developed under the influence of Eros. Thus masochism is witness for and residue of an ancient phase during which the linking of the death instinct with Eros took place. It is a remainder from the period in which the raving to destruction, the drive into nothingness, first experienced the power of love. It appears as an earthly representative of the destructive impulse which first turned against the next object, striving for destruction and dissolution of the ego. Masochism was able to get only a concession from, not the capitulation of the death instinct. The cross it carries to Golgotha is adorned with rose.”<sup>2</sup>





Unless one is fortunate enough to live in a large city, there is great difficulty in gaining access to Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. North America's Religious Right actively prevents theatrical screenings by engaging in direct and indirect censorship tactics. Cinemas are either openly picketed or threatened by other "subtle" means. If Lacan believed that the Real can never be known, fundamentalists now avow that Scorsese's work will never be shown. This is particularly so in Southern Illinois. During 1988 local Carbon-dale churches successfully threatened cinemas with an economic blockade if the Devil's handiwork reached any screen. Shepherds ordered their flocks to abstain from any offending cinema for 12 months. In St. Louis, Missouri, none of the major chains attempted to exhibit the film. Only one independent cinema took the risk. Now Christian communities use the same tactics on local video rental establishments. (In mid-1989, two local video stores offer the film but interestingly don't advertise its availability.) The current situation is one of stalemate. Even national video organizations are hesitant about a general release. Unlike the recent controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, liberal opposition is curiously silent. While the intellectual community, reacting against a decade of Islamic insurgency, openly support a trivial novel, no major voices are raised against suppression of a work taking a far more inclusive view of one of Western civilization's ideological

director has always wanted to make may not, necessarily, be his best.

There are many flaws in the project — the generic constraints of the biblical epic that have overwhelmed diverse talents such as Nicholas Ray, John Huston, and George Stevens in the past; Willem Dafoe's lack of magnetism stimulating one to make telling comparisons with De Niro; the uncohesive nature of the whole construction; the jarring awkwardness of American streetwise dialogue (more appropriate to Scorsese's urban milieu of *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*); and over-literal use of special effects such as the *Videodrome* inspired "sacred heart" and a Last Supper reminiscent of one scene in *Taste the Blood of Dracula*. There is an inescapable feeling of a director uncomfortable with a genre's requirements that prevent him working in an artistically harmonious relationship.

Scorsese is definitely not master of his material. He is overwhelmed by his literary source — Kazantzakis's original novel. At first sight there appears to be little evidence of personal engagement in this cinematic adaptation. The one-time candidate for the priesthood mentally returns to his former milieu of spiritual oppression. Isolated from the secular world of his greatest successes, Scorsese appears choked like the seed in the parable of the sower. *The Last Temptation of Christ* reveals this tension. The director is now back inside the whale's belly. He had once emerged from it, gaining the necessary distance

ly self-conscious in its artistic references to Bosch and Ravenna, and exhibits the worst tendencies of Hollywood art cinema. Scorsese appears to be the victim of a generic format which usually allows little variation in artistic treatment.

However, although problematic, *The Last Temptation* has several suggestive parallels with Scorsese's other work. It contains a progressive subversiveness that goes beyond (as well as including) the scandalous fact of Christ's sexuality. Based upon a novel stressing Christ's human weakness, *The Last Temptation of Christ* is really a cinematic assault upon the Symbolic Law of the Father and the Oedipal Trajectory. Although not as coherent as it could be, the film attempts to attack the roots of a system that have variously oppressed J.R., Charlie, Travis Bickle, Jimmy Doyle, Jake La Motta, and Rupert Pupkin — especially in its Catholic manifestations. As mankind's redeemer the Son is, perversely, the ultimate victim of the Father's Law. His sacrifice institutes a pattern for obedience, psychic oppression, rigid gender barriers, and sexist authoritarianism that has caused 2,000 years of human misery. The alternative scenario of the last temptation is one which involves not merely sexuality. It tentatively suggests the foundations of a new male order outside the Law of the Father, a gentle world in which all may live in peace apart from patriarchal violence. *The Last Temptation's* scandal is one in which several components mingle in provocative ways — previous cinematic treatments of the Christ epic, Scorsese's authorship patterns, and the complex Freudian concept of masochism used in the realm of cinematic spectacle.

The Biblical story as epic appears the ideal subject for the inflated authoritarian talents of Cecil B. DeMille and his new Hollywood successor, Steven Spielberg. Despite the Saviour having human qualities he is always the sanctioned Other, his crises of conscience in Gethsemane and on the Cross reduced to insignificance by his Messianic status. From H.B. Warner in *The King of Kings* to Max von Sydow in the over-ponderous *The Greatest Story Ever Told* he is necessarily removed from ordinary human feelings and desires. The temptation in the wilderness puts him squarely on the side of the divine. As a reverential figure in art, literature and cinema he is truly one-dimensional — a feature George Stevens recognized by introducing his Christ with a stylized, quasi-Byzantine tapestry. The vast majority of

## It is tragic that *The Last Temptation* is not the dynamically oppositional artistic project that would herald a radical cinematic reversal of Reaganite religious conservatism

icons of individual oppression. After all Allah is fair game! He is no WASP bastion of authority.

With these circumstances in mind, it is tragic that *The Last Temptation* is not the dynamically oppositional artistic project that would herald a radical cinematic reversal of Reaganite religious conservatism. Although Scorsese has attempted to make this film for the last 20 years, it is not a wholly satisfactory film. Indeed the work supports one cardinal tenet of authorship — the film a

to criticize a religiously sanctioned system of Oedipal oppression that ruined the inner lives of his movie characters. It is not surprising that the film appears far below the level of his finest works — *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *New York, New York*, *Raging Bull*, and *King of Comedy*. These all distinctively engaged with the dilemmas of male subjectivity. All subversively question patriarchal authority in highly distinctive ways.

*The Last Temptation* is thus a mixed work. It is artistically flawed, too overt-





Willem Dafoe in *The Last Temptation of Christ*

movie adaptations may have changed the rules of representation (*Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell*) but left the Saviour's figure intact. Although a friend of thieves, tax collectors, and prostitutes there is no doubt as to where the dividing line stands. Male sinners are to unquestionably admit their guilt and submit to divine authority. The same is true for females. Christ's 12 disciples are all male. Woman's role is to bear, nurture and weep over him (with virginity conspicuously intact in the case of his mother) or subordinately wash his feet with her hair as does the reformed Mary Magdalene.

There appears to be little any director can do with such a figure. However, in the cinematic representations of Christ certain traits have appeared that consciously or unconsciously lend themselves to subversive readings. In terms of viewing a film in the light of later associations Julian Duvivier's *Golgotha* has ironic implications. Anti-Semitic actor Robert Le Vigan (later infamously immortalized in Céline's *D'Un Chateau a l'autre*, *Nord* and *Rigadoon*) portrayed Christ. Jean Gabin was Pontius Pilate. Three years later Duvivier reversed roles in *Pepe Le Moko*. This time Le Vigan represents the Law, an impersonal

Inspector Javert figure. He relentlessly pursues Gabin who dies on the railings in a quasi-crucified position — victim to the illusion of romantic love. *Pepe Le Moko* takes on interesting associations particularly in its use of actors from the earlier film. The Italian-made *Pontius Pilate* had the same actor (John Drew Barrymore) playing Christ and Judas. Its director overlooked the remarkable implications of duality between the two personalities. In certain versions Christ's body is far too holy to be shown — *Ben-Hur* (both versions), *The Big Fisherman*. It is almost as if the directors were aware of the sexual associations of the male body as spectacle that critics have recently analyzed<sup>1</sup> — particularly in the crucifixion. This certainly occurs with Jeffrey Hunter's feminized Christ in *King of Kings*. His lack of bodily hair prominently contrasts with the hirsute penitent thief in Ray's reverse shots. This may be one reason why Stevens later shot his crucifixion from a respectful distance in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Another positive trait of Ray's version is the equal friendship existing between Christ and his mother (Siobhan McKenna) with no church-sanctioned gendered hierarchical associations. As we shall see, Scor-

sese's version is the most radical in developing significant oppositional motifs which go against the grain of traditional depictions.

In terms of authorship the Scorsese/Schrader relationship needs close examination. Whose is the dominant sensibility in *The Last Temptation*? The Saviour's sacrifice on the Cross has a superficial resemblance to *Mishima's* climax. Although Scorsese has wanted to make *The Last Temptation* for decades, the film's proximity to *Mishima* suggests Schrader's influence. However, once we have examined the track records of the two talents the answer will become obvious. The Catholic (Scorsese) and Calvinist (Schrader) sensibilities previously collaborated on *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*. Both films involve angst-ridden characters torn apart by questions of male identity and systems of belief. "God's lonely man" Travis Bickle finds the regeneration-through-violence *Searchers* paradigm irrelevant to his social and personal predicament. Former systems of belief no longer provide easy answers. Jake La Motta's narcissistic prowess is a pathological expression of this tormented victimization by Oedipal Law, the American Dream, and his repressed homo-



sexual drives.<sup>4</sup> There is no explicit answer to their tragic dilemmas, only the overpowering feeling of changing a rotten society that is damning individual lives. Paul Schrader's work as scenarist and director similarly utilizes the quest motif but almost always in favour of the status quo. *Blue Collar* has a pessimistic, "that's human nature," view of labour relations. *Hardcore* redeems the patriarchal values of *The Searchers* myth in a Calvinistic finale. *Old Boyfriends* patronized its female characters. *American Gigolo* conclusively affirms traditional heterosexual relationships while *Mishima* presents a solipsistic narcissistic vision of artistic nihilism. Schrader's work relies on an asocial, individualistic redemption making no attempt to interrogate contradictory contemporary tensions.<sup>5</sup> Scorsese's films, conversely, complement Michael Cimino's by questioning the patriarchally structured individual heroic role in society. Although there are no individual answers provided for his hero's dilemmas, Scorsese unanimously asserts that accommodation to social norms always involves pain, confusion, and misery.<sup>6</sup>

In *Who's That Knocking at My Door*, J.R./Harvey Keitel is the prototypical Scorsese hero at odds with society over its proscribed gender roles and his own confused feelings.<sup>7</sup> The movie concludes with an overdetermined visual bombardment of flashbacks showing J.R. and his girl kissing, sexual fantasies, contrasted with the norm of mother and children — all juxtaposed with Western civilization's key religious ideological images of religious statues and Christ. The final result is J.R.'s own phantasmatic crucifixion when blood drips from his mouth.<sup>8</sup> Charlie/Keitel of *Mean Streets* exhibits classic masochistic symptoms illustrating repressed confusion over the male role and attempted obeisance to authority. He holds his finger over a candle in church.<sup>9</sup> Later, he puts his hand over an open fire in a restaurant stove. The locations of the two events are significant. One is the spiritual home of the Father. The other is the domain of his earthly counterpart — Don Giovanni/Cesare Danova. Like other Scorsese figures (*Taxi Driver*, *New York, New York*, *Raging Bull*, *King of Comedy*) Charlie finds there is a difference between the painful realities of civilized life and the "way things are supposed to be." It appears only natural that Scorsese now turns to the original embodiment of the Father's Law and its first sacrificial victim in *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

According to Raymond Williams, the

Christian tragic tradition differs from its secular counterparts in two ways.<sup>10</sup> Its depiction lacks a familiar social context where the action occurs thus placing it in another plane of reality. Secondly, the drama focusses on an individual hero rather than on ruling families and collective groups. Since the struggle's outcome is already inevitable (like the climax of *Day of the Jackal*) there is little scope for the play of alternatives and other possible readings. In strict Bakhtinian terms the Christian Myth is the ultimate monological drama. Our attitude towards the events is usually pity for one who suffered in our place. Christ's inevitable sacrificial death ought to have ushered in a New Covenant, a new system of personal relationships. But the end was the return of the status quo in a new form, where guilt, authoritarian tendencies, psychic enslavement, and strict hierarchical gendered relationships reasserted themselves.

I would suggest that the film differs from Williams' outline in two significant respects. First, the action is situated in a specific social environment — a Palestine under Roman occupation and rigid religious control governing modes of behaviour. Secular and spiritual forces unite in controlling human behaviour — a pattern still relevant today. Thus, there is an indirect parallel present with our own era. Secondly, although Scorsese's Christ is an individual hero, his characteristics are not divorced from the dilemmas of personal human existence. They are relevant to the social plight of humanity today, especially in regard to contemporary confusions over the male role. He has little of the self-assurance associated with his cinematic predecessors, such as Jeffrey Hunter and Max Von Sydow. He is a man torn apart by conflicting desires. His behaviour differs from both social norms and accepted gender definitions both in the biblical and contemporary senses. Dafoe's Christ is a male hero for the '80s in opposition to contemporary cinematic masculine definitions. Insecure, doubting, he oscillates between extremes of maleness and femaleness, exhibiting masochistic symptoms and hysterical traits common to those classical Hollywood figures tormented by their inability to live up to the Father's Law such as Jonathan Shields of *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) Dave Waggoman of *The Man from Laramie* (1955) and Kyle Hadley of *Written on the Wind* (1956)<sup>11</sup> As in the original novel, the Father's "talons on the brain" force Christ to undergo a

mission he has no desire for. But even though he accepts his fate, the film suggestively undercuts the final redemptive sacrifice.

Actually the "scandalous" Last Temptation remains in the memory. It presents us with a vision of what might have been — a world in which the male lives his feminized qualities without contradictions in a maternal scenario governed by a female angel — not the male figure of the original novel. It is not without significance that the angel is pre-pubertal suggesting her association with a world outside the domains of the Father's Oedipal Law. While Christ ages she does not. Christ's new world is one devoid of the violence and male authority that initially caused his personal dilemma. But the intervention of the masculine world causes a reversal. The real temptation is thus actually not what removes Christ from the Cross but that which sends him back to the Cross. Its agents are violent and psychotic. The casting of Harry Dean Stanton as Saul/Paul is extremely important here in view of this actor's association with "weirdo" roles in the new Hollywood cinema. A similar significance surrounds Harvey Keitel's role as Judas. Keitel's associations naturally remind us of the confused (J.R., Charlie) and exploitative males (*Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More*, *Taxi Driver*) of his previous Scorsese films. Both Judas and Saul belong to the fanatical Zealot group whose ultimate activities result in destruction for the Jewish people. The actual tragedy of *The Last Temptation* is, ironically, Christ's submission to his divinely appointed destiny and the ultimate victory of the Father's Law.

When we view *The Last Temptation* in terms of its use of the masochistic scenario, we will find a rationale for the film's difference from '80s Hollywood narrative, its ponderous style, and the lack of voyeuristic gratification in the use of the scandalous, sexual phantasy. As Pam Cook notes,<sup>12</sup> the film has a discursive nature, dealing with abstract concepts such as mental and physical revolution, knowledge and truth, love and celibacy, active and passive resistance all set in a world undergoing ideological and political turmoil. Its hero exhibits those alternative masochistic traits of vacillating modes of behaviour — anger, passivity, doubt, flagellation. Since we already know what will happen, the film presents a different form of dramatic suspense breaking the rules of Hollywood dynamic editing by presenting a slower-paced alternative scenario in the last temptation scenes.



The film anticipates this in its self-conscious visual recreations of classical religious paintings in particular scenes. Another reversal of the usual pattern occurs in the male body becoming the explicit object of the cinematic gaze especially with Dafoe's nudity. The whole film has a formally slow, dramatic progression, ponderously stylistic which makes it an arduous task to watch. But it is one peculiarly suited to the masochistic aesthetic which Scorsese has chosen (consciously or unconsciously) to use.

As Gilles Deleuze has stated, "Masochism is above all formal and dramatic: this means that its peculiar pleasure-

recent research on masochism to *The Last Temptation*. Although the masochistic aesthetic has a significant connection to the pre-Oedipal mother,<sup>14</sup> it also has associations with the Law of the Father.<sup>15</sup> This is particularly so in *The Last Temptation*. Rather than attempting to identify with the pre-Oedipal mother, Scorsese's Christ is caught in a conflict closer to the Freudian categorical Oedipal imperative. If he marries and bears children, he becomes a father, but one in a different sense from that envisaged by religiously sanctioned patriarchal law. By returning to the Father's sacrificial will, Christ will submit to the ultimate castration — by death upon

individual torment. The film's actual subversiveness is something actually more complex than the notorious sexual scene. It is really in its utilization of the primal scenes phantasy in association with "the last temptation" that its real significance lies.

Christian Metz has defined the cinematic signifier as not only psychoanalytic but also, "more precisely Oedipal in type."<sup>16</sup> He thus regards the viewing situation as involving voyeuristic tendencies. However, Kaja Silverman proposes an alternative interpretation. She regards the viewing as involving passivity and uncertainty, not Metz's mastery and sadism. Silverman refers to Freud's classic accounts of the primal scene phantasy in "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" and "The Wolfman" case. She believes that the child's identification with the primal scenes is not one of secure mastery. Rather, it can pose serious challenges to traditional gender alignments so that "the primal scene is perhaps most profoundly disruptive of conventional masculinity in the way it articulates knowledge."<sup>17</sup> Patriarchal identification for the male child does not necessarily follow. He may identify either with the father or the mother. Whatever the case may be, the important point to note is that the scene can blur any strict mode of gender differentiation.

There are two relevant scenes in *The Last Temptation of Christ* where primal phantasies operate at significant points in conjunction with the masochistic characteristics of the Christ figure throughout the film. The first follows Jesus's uncertainty after Judas accuses him of being a collaborator. We have already seen the future Saviour in torment, making crosses for the Romans and carrying them to Golgotha. In contrast to the traditional New Testament versions where his visit to John the Baptist begins his "call," this scene really represents the actual turning point in the film. Jesus visits Mary Magdalene who has turned to prostitution. She is a victim of male-ordained social ordinances. Shamed as a result of his refusal to complete the betrothal ceremony, she can only be damned by society to this way of life. In contrast to the novel, Jesus witnesses her activities as a group spectator in a situation akin to a future cinema audience watching the primal scene. What is so significant about this sequence is the role of Jesus as voyeuristic spectator. He is not in control of his look. The film depicts him as torn with conflicting emotions all involving pas-



Willem Dafoe in *The Last Temptation of Christ*

sion complex is determined by a particular kind of formalism and its experience of guilt by a specific story."<sup>18</sup> The progress of the Saviour towards Golgotha, the pain involved, and the guilt if he does not submit to the Father's Law are all salient factors towards applying

the Cross. But he will in no way be able to follow the logical development of the Oedipal Complex by becoming a father after acceptance of the Father's Will. *The Last Temptation of Christ* presents this particular double-bind situation, the result of which is its hero's agonised,



sivity, uncertainty and torment — not sadism and mastery. There is thus the definite split between the future Saviour who will initiate the full authority of patriarchal order and the internally divided figure we see. The second important scene is Christ's phantasmatic union with Mary Magdalene. Here, the viewer (not Jesus) is the observer. Although Scorsese films the scene with the utmost discretion, it is loaded with so many emotionally taboo overtones that an audience feels disturbed knowing its difference from the "accepted version." Watching this scene is the little girl angel. These two primal scenes are significant moments in the film's narration. They present psychically overdetermined sexual scenes challenging patriarchally authorised truth, the dominance of the viewer's look, and the associated claims of gender differentiation. They are disturbing in the way Silverman suggests.

Masculinity is thus perhaps never as fully troubled as it is within the primal scene. It is not merely that knowledge fails there to provide power, or to shore up sexual difference, but that vision, which is culturally coded as a phallic function, and which indeed helps to constitute masculinity, turns back against the child, inducing a sense of inadequacy and exclusion.<sup>17</sup>

The actual Last Temptation is a scandal not solely in terms of the sexual act but most importantly in elaborating an alternative male role for the Saviour. He marries Mary Magdalene, fathers a child, engages in a non-monogamous, jealousy-free union with Martha and Mary, remaining throughout his phantasy life — a feminized, non-aggressive male. Characteristically, the film's manifest text depicts the source of the temptation as belonging to the demonic world. But this world is an alternative order outside patriarchy. Scorsese has avoided the racist implications of the original depiction by depicting the devil as a sweet, harmless, young girl, who is "demonic" only in so far as she suggests an alternate way of life blasphemous to patriarchal institutions. A male figure is the one who finally designates her as satanic. But Scorsese, resists any temptation to use the now debased special effects of the '80s horror film to support this statement and gratify audience imaginations.

The actual temptation is really an erotic, positively perverse narrative presenting an alternative scenario of what might have been. Kaja Silverman's account of Freud's use of perversion in

*The Three Essays of Sexuality* is again valuable. She points out that "perversion intrudes as the temptation to engage in a different kind of erotic narrative, one whose organisation is aleatory and paratactic rather than direct and hypotactic, preferring fore-pleasures to end-pleasures and browsing to discharge."<sup>18</sup> This form of sexuality can take the form of a "deferred action."<sup>19</sup> Such is the role of the last Temptation. In terms of understanding the perverse nature of this deferred action, it has a specific Oedipal relationship.

The concept of perversion is equally unthinkable apart from the Oedipus complex since it derives all its meaning and force from its relation to that structuring moment and the premium it places upon genital sexuality. It is in fact something of a misnomer to characterize infantile sexuality as 'polymorphously perverse' since sexuality only becomes perverse at the point where it constitutes either a retreat from Oedipal structuration, or a transgressive acting out of its dictates. What I am trying to say is that perversion always contains the trace of Oedipus within it — that it represents some kind of response to what it repudiates, and is always organized to some degree by what it subverts."<sup>20</sup> (italics mine).

This is an apt description both of the last temptation and Christ's masochistic stances throughout the film — which are, in reality, ways of opposing the Law of the Father which he must institute through his own death. Perversion is thus capitulation and revolt.<sup>21</sup> Jesus capitulates to his deepest phantasies on the Cross. But they also involve a revolt against the Father's will. He rebels against the Law of the Father and its associated familial restraints that have resulted in thousands of years of human misery. The final revolt is not one of sadism and aggressiveness, characteristic of patriarchal society, but a gentle, feminized form of masochistic sexuality. In this realm of pleasure, Christ is no longer the leader but the led.

The earlier masochistic postures were also revolutionary gestures. As Theodor Reik noted, male masochism can have a disruptive function unlike its female counterpart.<sup>22</sup> We initially see Jesus denying both historical destiny and social identity by choosing a masochistic posture usually identified with femininity. His anti-social activities in making crosses and refusing to marry Mary really represent Freud's understanding

of "moral masochism."<sup>24</sup> These are sabotage acts threatening the super-ego's supremacy in fixing the symbolic functions of the Law of the Father by dissolving the Oedipus complex. What thus emerges are doubt tendencies, identity/gender crises, and fear of the Father. By deriving erotic gratification from fear of punishment, the masochist develops massive self-destructive capacities unless released in a new direction. As a result of this moral masochism, the super-ego now assumes titanic proportions making its object a sacrificial victim. The importance of *The Last Temptation of Christ* lies in demythologising the traditional religiously sanctioned association of the Christ myth to our time. What happens to Christ is really an internal battle between the ego and the super-ego — symbolically introjective processes which attempt to push him towards the realms of Law and phallus. The new direction which will save Christ from the results of his patriarchal self-sacrifice is actually the differential realm of the last temptation.

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud understood the super-ego as being "the germ from which all religions have evolved."<sup>25</sup> The film presents this conflict between the demands of the super-ego and the opposing desires of the ego which, in this case, take a masochistic direction. The son cannot be the father since the super-ego's constraints prohibit any metamorphosis unless he enter the alternative, non-patriarchal realm of the last temptation. Before this happens, the ego takes violent masochistic pleasure in the pain inflicted by the super-ego. Freud's comments in *Civilization and Its Discontents* bear an uncanny similarity to the torments of Scorsese's Christ.

"The sense of guilt, the harshness of the super-ego . . . is the same thing as the severity of the conscience. It is the perception which the ego has of being watched over in this way, the assessment of the tension between its own strivings and the demands of the super-ego. The fear of this critical agency (a fear which is at the bottom of the whole relationship), the need for punishment, is an instinctual manifestation on the part of the ego, which has become masochistic under the influence of a sadistic super-ego; it is a portion . . . of the instinct towards internal destruction present in the ego, employed by forming an erotic attachment to the super-ego."<sup>26</sup>

Christ is the historical ancestor of Scorsese's tragic gallery of cinematic victims. But for a brief moment in





Martin Scorsese on the set of *The Last Temptation of Christ*



cinematic time, he has what the others all lack — access to a different realm of cultural order.

Active within the scenario is a conflict between two of Freud's fundamental instincts — Eros and Thanatos. The last temptation represents Christ's human strivings for a normal human existence involving love, sexuality and sincere companionship. The Death Instinct represents the demands of his super-ego. What the last temptation shows us is the tantalizing glimpse of an alternative path for the Christ figure, living in the realms of Eros instead of submitting to the Father's Death-orientated demands. Theodor Reik has some interesting suggestions in his work.

I am of the opinion that the concept of death instinct and Eros offers us one of our most profound insights into the nature of existence, that it embraces the tremendous scale of instinctual phenomena of all creation. The conclusions are unavoidable. In masochism, as in its counterpart, sadism, we recognize an offshoot of the death urge which has been libidinally bound. Though agreeing with Freud's hypothesis and admiring its grandeur I cannot admit that it dispenses with the duty of investigating every problem of instinctual phenomena."<sup>13</sup>

Reik's further observations on Christian moral masochism note the excessive use of the body as object of display which took Christ's suffering and death as a prototype.<sup>14</sup> One master tableau is the Crucifixion. It had a determining effect on notions of sacrifice far beyond its original historical context. One example occurs in literature of the Great War. Paul Fussell refers to a group of World War I writers who used the motif in a homoerotic manner which had unconscious implications for an alternative cultural order.<sup>15</sup> It is this different realm emerging from Theodor Reik's work on Christian moral masochism that Kaja Silverman refers to in her research. Although she does not refer to *The Last Temptation* her findings have suggestive implications. By opposing social structures the Christian masochist has a potential for becoming a rebel or revolutionary figure.

In this particular sub-species of moral masochism there would thus seem to be a strong heterocosmic impulse — the desire to remake the world in another image altogether to forge a different cultural order (*italics mine*).

The Christian masochist also seeks to remake him or herself according to the exemplum of the suffering Christ, the very picture of divestiture and loss. Insofar as such an identification implies the complete and utter negation of phallic values, Christian masochism has radically emasculating implications, and is intrinsically incompatible with the phallic pretensions of masculinity. And since its primary exemplar is a male rather than a female subject, those implications would seem impossible to ignore. Remarkably, Christianity also redefines the paternal legacy; it is all through the assumption of his place within the holy family that Christ comes to be installed in a suffering and castrated position."<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, this alternative became lost in 2,000 years of patriarchal violence. But it briefly re-emerges in *The Last Temptation*. Christ undergoes both mental and physical agonies to become the ultimate obedient Son on the Cross. Succumbing to the Eros Instinct, he unsutures himself from the crucifixion narrative's patriarchal order to enter a different realm — that of the girl angel. He denies the Father and obeys the Feminine. By entering into his temptation Christ enters into a positive moral masochistic phantasy of a different cultural order. It is one defined by Gilles Deleuze of a liberating "rebirth in which the father will have no part."<sup>17</sup> This new symbolic order has expelled the father.

tude becoming at peace with himself and the world. Marrying Mary, raising children, living in a non-monogamous Levirate relationship with Martha and Mary, he becomes a "feminine," yet heterosexual male subject"<sup>18</sup> in a world contrary to the violent arena of the normal familial cultural contract.

As an audience we know this world will not last. Somehow, the Law of the Father will regain its hold on the cinematic spectacle. There is also a bitter irony in that patriarchy continues to function without the Saviour. As the converted Zealot Paul states to Christ the message does not really need him. Christ's salvation is really an individual one outside history. To be really effective, a more radical revolution is needed that will change both the individual and society. Certainly, there is a subversiveness involved in seeing the Saviour take an alternative path. But, as his encounters with Paul and Judas show, the revolution needs to continue beyond the individual and into the social historical world. In the meantime, we watch a representation that appears uncertain, dilatory, with pleasurable and unpleasurable anticipations, prolonging detail at the expense of climax and consumation. In other words, Reik's realm of moral masochism.<sup>14</sup> But once Christ encounters Paul and Judas, representatives of the Death Instinct, they reassert the power of the punishing Super-Ego, cause guilt feelings, and send him back to the Cross. The Son decides to submit

**It is undeniable that (for the unindoctrinated viewer) the film's real tragedy is Christ's return to the Cross. We remember the world of the last temptation, one of peacefulness . . . where male and female live in harmony under the feminine gaze.**

By obeying the little girl, Christ enters an alternative maternal realm. Her position in the scenario reminds one of the new Messianic order in *Isaiah 11.6c* — "and a little child shall lead them." Disavowing his historical destiny, Christ "suspends belief in and neutralizes the given in such a way that a new horizon opens up beyond the given and in place of it."<sup>12</sup> He also peacefully takes on the characteristics of Freud's patient in "A Child is Being Beaten." Disciplined by the mother, he inherits a feminine atti-

tude to the Paternal Law as a result of selfish heroic feelings. He rushes back to his ultimate punishment. Back on the Cross, he is once more in the paternal symbolic realm. His mission accomplished, "It is completed," the film closes.

It is undeniable that (for the unindoctrinated viewer) the film's real tragedy is Christ's return to the Cross. We remember the world of the last temptation, one of peacefulness and gentle relationships where male and female live in harmony under the feminine gaze.



Unfortunately, this deeply personal project is not artistically successful. It needs a better understanding of the material's implication so that the subversiveness extends beyond the realm of a problematic alternative individual solution and into the arena of contemporary relevance. Perhaps the author is too near the material, needing some modicum of distance for a truly successful film.

I've written above that *The Last Temptation of Christ* seems to lack Scorsese's personal touch. But in a way, the author is certainly in the text but not in the manner we would normally expect. We are all familiar with Scorsese's cameo appearances in his movies. He is Charlie's alter ego in *Mean Streets*, speaking his voice-over in at least two scenes. One anticipates Dafoe's masochistic Christ — "Lord, I'm not worthy to eat your flesh, not worthy to drink your blood." He is Bickle's psychotic demon in *Taxi Driver* as the would-be murderer. As the stage-hand, he calls on the redeemed Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*'s concluding scene. He is Jerry Langford's TV director in *King of Comedy* and beams the infernoesque night-club light on to Griffin Dunne in *After Hours*. He is curiously absent as a physical presence in *The Last Tempta-*

*tion of Christ*. But, in another sense, he is there intervening via one of his characters. The little girl angel watches over Christ, in that brief union with Mary Magdalene, very similar to a film director. It is almost as if she represents a narcissistic object choice, a love for what one would like to be, in a different, non-violent world of unconscious phantasy.

In her essay on Henry James, Silverman argues against Freud's assumption that there is a direct match between actual author and his authorial phantasmatic. The latter may contain excessive, transgressive, or reactionary elements that relate to the former. In this reading, *The Last Temptation* is certainly an excessive and transgressive work in terms of the phantasmatic sequence. But this does not necessarily justify the whole film as artistically successful. However, on the personal level, it is still an important work despite its flaws. We may regard the authorship question in a similar manner to Silverman's comments concerning Henry James where his authorial subjectivity radically subverts his assigned sexual position. She speaks of reading "the authorial phantasmatic, when it is appropriate to do so, against the class, race, gender or historical moment of the biographical

author, and the class, race, gender or historical moment of the biographical author *against* the phantasmatic."<sup>15</sup> Again, it is the text, particularly the gaps, contradictions, and attempted emergence of alternative social possibilities that tell us more about the author than the individual himself. Some interaction is still going on between text and author. That is a good sign when we remember *The Color of Money*. In an era when Hollywood is still clinging to the tattered religious emblems of Reaganite cinema — *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Star Trek V - The Final Frontier* — there is an urgent need for Scorsese to continue attempting some form of oppositional practice. But will he return to the heights of his former significant works?

## Notes

1. This article is based on a paper delivered at the 87th Meeting of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association, Chicago, April 27th, 1989.
2. Theodor, Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, Trans. Margaret H. Beigel and Gertrud M. Kurth (New York: Grove Press, 1957), 32.
3. See Steve Neale, "Chariots of Fire," *Screen* 23, 3-4 (September-October 1982): 47-53; "Masculinity as Spectacle," *Screen*, 24 6 (1983).



Robert De Niro and Stephen Prince in *Taxi Driver*



- 2-17, and Paul Willeman, "Looking at the Male," *Framework* 15/16/17 (Summer 1981): 16
- 4 See Pam Cook, "Masculinity in Crisis," *Screen* 23, 3-4 (September-October 1982): 39-46. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 245-258.
- 5 Wood 51
- 6 For work on Scorsese see Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance* (South Brunswick, New Jersey: A.S. Barnes, 1977), 122-148; Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 206-209; Mary Pat Kelley, *Martin Scorsese: The First Decade* (Pleasantville, New York: Redgrave Publishing Co., 1980); Michael Bliss, *Martin Scorsese and Michael Cimino* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1985), Wood 245-269, 290-318, and Marion Weiss, *Martin Scorsese: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987). *The Color of Money* is an exception to the above rule being little different from a typical '80s Hollywood product in its project of restoring the Father/Paul Newman's significance as a model for the younger yuppie generation/Tom Cruise.
- 7 On the film's opening shots Bliss comments "conflict, not harmony, is going to be the reigning force in this film's universe" (33).
- 8 There are "cruel religious mechanisms" affecting the lives of J.R. and his two friends as Bliss notes "Locked up, buttoned into, shut inside their religiously polluted view of life, the three friends are trapped in an existence within which they find reaching out and establishing a forthright relationship with a woman to be simply impossible" (35).
- 9 According to Jacobs 129, a priest suggested this finger exercise to Scorsese as a way of approximating one billionth of the fires of hell!
- 10 Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Verso 1979) cited by Cook 45.
- 11 See Susan Morrison, "Sirk, Scorsese, and Hysteria: A Double(d) Reading," *CineAction!* 6 (Fall '86): 17-25.
- 12 Pam Cook, "The Last Temptation of Christ," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 55:657 (October 1988): 88.
- 13 Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: George Braziller 1971), 95.
- 14 So Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 9:4 (Fall 1984): 267-282; "Visual Pleasure and the Masochistic Aesthetic," *Journal of Film and Video*, 37:2 (Spring 1985): 5-26; and *In the Realm of Pleasure* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
- 15 So Kaja Silverman, "Masochism and Male Subjectivity," *Cinema Obscura* 17 (1988): 31-66. Lynne Kirby has traced this concept back into the early days of pre-classical cinema. See "Male Hysteria and Early Cinema," *Cinema Obscura* 17: 113-131. One of her observations is especially pertinent to this article: "For what male hysteria shows us is not so much the coding of men as women, as the uncoding of men as men" (126).
- 16 Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton, Annywl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfredo Guzzetti (London: Macmillan, 1985), 64.
- 17 Kaja Silverman, "Too Early/Too Late: Subjectivity and the Primal Scene in Henry James," *Novel* 21: 2-3 (1988): 157.
- 18 Silverman 158.
- 19 Silverman, *Masochism* 32.
- 20 So Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1987), 30.
- 21 Silverman 32.
- 22 See here Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (London: Free Association Press, 1984): 24, also cited by Silverman.
- 23 Theodor Reik, *Masochism* 216.
- 24 See Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis, Volume II: The Pelican Freud Library* (London: Penguin 1984), 420-426.
- 25 Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and The Id," op. cit., 376.
- 26 Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," *Civilization, Society and Religion et al., Volume 12: The Pelican Freud Library* (London: Penguin 1985), 329-330.
- 27 Reik 33.
- 28 Reik 351-354. "The martyrs of early Christianity attached strikingly great importance to the fact that their suffering *ad maiorem Christi gloriam* was seen. These witnesses to the faith desired to have witnesses of their martyrdom. They wanted all the world to know about their passionate zeal" (77-78).
- 29 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975): 119. Note his reference to Wilfrid Owen's homoeroticism of the Christ legend in *Maudy Thursday*: "If the boys of Owen's early imagination begin as interesting 'lads' ripe for history, they end as his 'men' in France, types not just of St. Sebastian, but of the perpetually sacrificed Christ" (287).
- 30 Silverman 44.
- 31 Deleuze 58.
- 32 Deleuze 28-29.
- 33 Silverman 57.
- 34 For the suspense factor in masochism see Reik 59-71.
- 35 Silverman, *Too Early/Too Late* 153.

## cineACTION!

A MAGAZINE OF RADICAL FILM CRITICISM & THEORY

## SUBSCRIPTION FORM

Please send me the next 4 issues of *CineAction!*, beginning with # \_\_\_\_\_

I enclose ☐ \$15 (Individuals) ☐ \$30 (Institutions)

Abroad, add \$10.00 for airmail ☐

Renewal ☐

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

MAIL CHEQUE & COMPLETED FORM (OR PHOTOCOPY) TO:

**CINEACTION!, 40 Alexander St., Apt. 705  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4Y 1B5**





# The CELLULOID CONTRADICTION:

## An Other Look At Parting Glances

by John Champagne

**I**n the 1987 revised edition of his book *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo refers to the film *Parting Glances* as "the most realistic re-creation of the world in which New York gays actually live that has ever been put on the screen."<sup>1</sup> Released in 1986, *Parting Glances* received favourable notices in much of the mainstream press.<sup>2</sup> It is currently available on video-cassette for home viewing, and is arguably still a popular film among gay men. As a friend of mine recently put it, "I can't possibly be friends with someone who doesn't like *Parting Glances*."



Russo locates the "genius" of the film in the supposed fact that "none of it is about being gay or even about how gay people live. The film revealed that movies can explore gay life without being about gay life. It's a film about how people get along; in this case, most of them happen to be gay."<sup>1</sup> In support of this reading of the film, Russo quotes director Bill Sherwood's insistence that, "The way I work as a filmmaker is that the gayness is assumed. Instead of starting out with some passionate cause or wanting to make a noble gay film, I just wanted to make a film. Period."<sup>2</sup>

Russo's book is admittedly a study of "images of gay people on screen" which argues that certain representations of gays and lesbians are "realistic" while others are stereotypically "homophobic." As such, Russo's book is subject to the same kind of critique that Christine Gledhill advances in a feminist context in her essay "Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism."<sup>3</sup> Gledhill's essay argues that both a realist film practice, and the realist ontology of film to which studies such as Russo's subscribe, constitute a problem for a radical feminist film criticism and practice. Gledhill locates three problems in a simplistic notion of cinematic realism as it may be utilized in the production of images of women. To summarize briefly these three problems: 1) The "reality" of women is multiple and contradictory, inflected by issues of class, race, and ethnic differences, difficult to define, and "not self-evidently given."<sup>4</sup> As a result, "There is no simple alternative reality to fill the gap and displace the stereotypes, which will be instantly recognized and accepted by women at large."<sup>5</sup> 2) "Realism" as an alternative to stereotyping "ignores the need to engage with the multiple function of the cinema as entertainment/ritual/art/fiction, which, although it must exist politically, does not exist alone, or even predominantly, for politics."<sup>6</sup> For Gledhill, a narrowly realist film practice is incapable of taking into account film's status as commodity, and the "needs" that film-as-commodity might "fulfill." 3) "Realism" "as a mode of cinematic production involves a complex interplay of techniques and devices."<sup>7</sup> It is a *construction*, and not simply "evoked by the intention to be real or true." As a construction, it produces certain "ideological effects." While these "ideological effects" may not be the same across history and culture, and are not applicable monolithically to the totality of spectators in all their historical complexity, any discussion of realism, especially utilized as a cinematic device in service of a marginalized group, must attempt to describe its ideological effects.

Gledhill's criticism of the problems of a naive realist aesthetic to the creation of women's "counter" cinema are readily applicable to Russo's implicit call for a "realist" gay cinema, as well as to his strategy of reading films. Applying Gledhill's critique specifically to Russo's reading of *Parting Glances*, we might ask a number of questions: *Whose* "gay" life is being "re-created" in the film? What are the class, racial, and ethnic affiliations of these gay people? What is the relationship between consumerist culture and the "realistic" portrayal of "gays" presented in the film? What are some of the "ideological effects" of *Parting Glances*? How is its "realism" constructed? Rather than answer any of these questions through a "close reading" of the film, I would instead like to provide a "test case" which will examine how the supposedly "positive" images of gay people presented in *Parting Glances* are read by a historically located audience. Specifically, I want to look at a number of papers written by my students in a course I taught entitled "Critical Writing and Film." I will utilize my students' readings of the film to argue that reading involves a complex interaction between spectator and text. It is a process which occurs neither in the reader nor in the text

exclusively, but in the "negotiations" between these two "textual" fields. Thus, the (supposedly) "radical" impact of a film like *Parting Glances* must be argued not from the "positive images" presented in the text, nor the preferences and prejudices of the reader, but from a consideration of the interaction of these two "poles" — an interaction that occurs in the process of reading.

"Critical Writing and Film" is a course taught regularly at the University of Pittsburgh. The course is designed by whomever happens to be teaching it that semester, the one requirement being that students be asked to write about film. I chose to organize my class's screening, reading, and writing assignments around the question of the cinematic representation of gender, sexuality, and the body. Beyond merely giving my students the opportunity to write about film, I saw the course as an effort on my part to problematize both the realist ontology of representation with which most students approach film, and the essentialist understanding of sexuality which guides their reading of sex in film. The purpose of my course was to examine film as one of the "cultural forms" which organized "the erotic possibilities of the human animal."<sup>8</sup> My students and I were thus involved in a project which in some sense conflicted with the one undertaken by Russo in the writing of his book. Russo's text does not challenge the possibility of a "realistic" representation of a "gay" person. It neither questions a realist ontology of representation, nor insists on the category of the homosexual subject as a historical construction.<sup>9</sup> One might level, based on his comments in Russo's book, the same charges against *Parting Glances*' director, Bill Sherwood.

My class was made up of 11 students, six of them women, and five of them men. They were all single, middle class (as far as I could discern), and between the ages of 19 and 22. One woman was African American; the remaining students were white. None of them identified themselves as gay or

### I chose to organize my class's . . . assignments around the question of the cinematic representation of gender, sexuality, and the body.

lesbian. I assumed that many of them were first generation college students, as this is often the case at the University of Pittsburgh. Only two of my students had any previous courses in Film Studies.

The course lasted 14 weeks. *Parting Glances* was the last film we studied that semester. Prior to screening the film, my students had read essays by Freud, Laura Mulvey, Richard Dyer, and Robin Wood,<sup>10</sup> and had screened and written on seven other films. Throughout the course, I was interested in moving my students beyond a consideration of "images" of sexuality to an examination of the ways in which given films "enunciate" those images. Thus, students were asked to consider how narrative, mise-en-scène, framing, sound, camera movement, and editing all contribute to a film's construction of sexuality. Their writing assignments in particular asked them to describe the ways in which films organize sexuality.

By the time my students screened *Parting Glances*, they had already seen two films which addressed, on some level, the question of male-to-male desire. These films were *Scorpio Rising*, and *Hair*. The problem that emerged from class discussion of these films was one of determining whether or not they did in fact constitute representations of gay men or gay sexuality. Because none of my students (presumably) defined



themselves as gay, they did not automatically recognize any expression of desire between men as "gay." The fact that the men in these films were not "overtly" feminized — or at least not in a way that my students were able to recognize — made the films even more puzzling to them. While I tried to problematize my students' understanding of gay men as "feminine," I realized that the only way I would have been able to argue that these films did in fact contain representations of "gay" men would have been to fall back on an essentialist understanding of sexuality — basically, to argue that these men were gay because I am, too, and I can tell. My desire to "come out" in this way helped me to see how certain ideas about a gay identity — ideas which also underlie Russo's project — speak through me in ways I can't completely control.<sup>14</sup> In this way, I am in a position similar to that of my students. Just as they naturally wanted to insist that they "naturally" didn't see these films as "gay," — because the men in them were not effeminate — I wanted to insist that I "naturally" saw that they were. Thus, part of the course work became for me a continual investigation of the historical and cultural construction of my own identity as a gay man.

Our discussion of *Scorpio Rising* in particular forced us to admit that, in order to produce a reading of the film as "about" either gay men or gay sexuality, one had to begin with some notion of what those things might be. Yet the film itself seemed also to refer to certain cultural signifiers which we associate with homosexuality. Had my students had a greater awareness of these cultural signifiers, they might have had less trouble identifying the film as "gay" — if, in fact, one can safely say this about this film. As a result of our discussion of *Scorpio Rising*, I decided to give my students the task of reading *Parting Glances* in terms of its construction of gay men and gay sexuality. Here is the text of the assignment:

*Parting Glances* is a film which identifies itself as "about" gay men and gay sexuality. For this assignment, I would like you to "construct" both gay sexuality and gay men on the basis of this film. In other words, I want you to read the film as if it represents one of your first encounters with gay sexuality. How does this film define gay sexuality? What are its characteristics? How does the film define gay men? How are they portrayed in the film? In order to answer these questions, you will want to think about all the things we've discussed this semester — the way the camera treats the characters' bodies, the "look," the way we as spectators are positioned vis à vis the characters, the mise-en-scene, etc. In other words, try to argue your interpretation of how the film constructs gay sexuality not merely from the film's narrative, but from other aspects as well.

Based on Russo's reading of the film, it might be argued that my assignment violates the spirit of *Parting Glances* in that it refuses to "take gayness for granted."<sup>15</sup> But for a film that is purportedly not about being gay, there is, in *Parting Glances*, a great deal of discussion of gay sexuality.<sup>16</sup> One might wonder according to what criteria a critic or filmmaker manages to differentiate those films "about" gay life from those which take "it" for granted.

At the time I distributed the assignment, one student objected that the way we "read" gay sexuality and gay men prior to the film can't help but influence our understanding of the way film constructs them. I replied that this objection could be applied to any reading situation. Reading is never a transparent act. It always involves the bringing of a certain number of questions to a text which will in some sense pro-

duce what *can* be read. I worded the assignment as I did in order to discourage any "easy" reading of the film which could arise out of an inattention to the specifics of the text. I was hoping that my students would see the assignment as an opportunity to bracket some of their cultural biases against homosexuality so that they might read "with," rather than "against," the film. In this way, I tried to create a situation in which Sherwood's positive images of gay sexuality would be "sympathetically" read.

\*\*\*

For those readers unfamiliar with *Parting Glances*, here is Russo's reconstruction of its narrative:

Robert works in a health organization and his immanent departure for Africa is more than a job transfer. His relationship is growing stale and Michael's ex-lover Nick has AIDS. Robert is fleeing a mess he doesn't want to handle . . . Through him [Nick], Michael is seeing a part of himself dying. Nick is the love of his life. In the center of the film is a long, brilliantly edited party sequence during which Nick and a young gay man [Peter] offer each other visions of a gay past and a gay future neither will ever know.<sup>17</sup>

I would like now to discuss four of the issues that emerged from my students' writing about, and class discussion of, *Parting Glances*. I will utilize my students' "readings" as accounts of their reception of the film by insisting that these readings are enabled and constrained by both the discipline of Cinema Studies, which my students were in the process of learning, and by the multiple and conflicting discourses which speak in and through my students.<sup>18</sup>

The four "issues" or aspects of the film I will discuss include: 1) the economic status of the characters; 2) the representation of women and ethnicity in the film; 3) the "feminization" of the character of Michael; 4) the contradictions inherent in the film's ideological project, and the ways in which Sherwood's (and Russo's) realist ontology of film contribute to these contradictions.

### The Economic Status of the Characters: Guppies on Parade

Several of the reviews of *Parting Glances* make reference to the affluent lifestyle of the film's protagonists.<sup>19</sup> While most of these reviews mention the Upper-Middle Class milieu of *Parting Glances* only in passing, Judith Willimason, writing in *New Statesmen*, locates the film's "weakness" in the fact that it takes its gay yuppie setting for granted.

. . . director Bill Sherwood's aim is to make a film about "people not homosexuals." Its "people" are nevertheless very clearly located in class terms by their Manhattan Yuppy interiors and high levels of consumer-durability. The extremely moving story . . . is set against a backdrop of rubber plants and ansa-phones, publisher's dinners and arty parties.<sup>20</sup>

In her response to *Parting Glances*, Natalie Barko, a student in my course, similarly notes the gay yuppie setting of the film:

Are all gay men wealthy, doctors, writers, or into the arts? Do they all smoke and listen to opera? Maybe, this is only the New York city homosexuals? I do not believe that all gay men are this way. If I were encountering homosexuality for the first time, *Parting Glances* would give me this impression. The movie seemed to stereotype homosexuals.



Natalae's reading is interesting in that it is at odds neither with Russo's project of reading the film "realistically," nor Sherwood's intention to create a film about "people not homosexuals." Natalae is reading the characters in *Parting Glances* as people. But she recognizes that "people" do not come from a single, monolithic class background. Her realization that all "people" are not yuppies leads her to be suspicious of the film's representation of gay men. The disparity between Russo's "positive" reading of these images and Natalae's "negative" reading confirms Gledhill's insistence that 1) no single image of a marginalized group can hope to account for all the historical and cultural variations within that group, and 2) the determination of whether an image is "positive" or "negative" is largely the results of the individual critic's point of view.<sup>21</sup> While it would be futile to insist that Sherwood's film ought to have reflected the real material circumstances of all gay men, we might wonder what kind of politics are embedded in Russo's reading of the film, which locates it as "the most realistic re-creation of the world in which New York gays live that has ever been put on screen."

### Women and Ethnicity

In her essay on the film, Kristen Kurtonick describes her discomfort with the film's representation of women.

Although Joan is Michael and Robert's friend, she is overweight, and unattractive. The only heterosexual couple at the party also happened to be the entertainment. And they were simply portrayed as being really strange, with their foreign accents, and unsociable attitudes. Even in the midst of a gay party, the woman starts dancing around while everybody gives her "drop dead" looks. It is interesting, too, that this woman is sneaky, she is found making out with some guy behind a curtain. Thus far the film has described two "types" of women — the obese,

and the odd. The third type of woman is married to a bisexual.

In his review of the film, critic David Edelstein notes Sherwood's attempts in *Parting Glances* to turn certain gay and straight stereotypes upside down.<sup>22</sup> Based on Kristen's reading of the film, we might wonder how "upside down" these stereotypes have turned — at least in terms of the film's representations of women and ethnicity.

There are few women in *Parting Glances*, and the few that do appear seem primarily to serve the purpose of reinscribing the homosexuality of the male characters. This seems to reverse one of the usual functions of women in Hollywood films — to insure the hero's *heterosexuality* — and yet this reversal serves paradoxically to reproduce more of the same. This is most apparent and disturbing in the scene which Kristen describes, in which a female German performance artist, accompanied on the piano by her husband, strips down to a leotard of sorts to reveal the numerous tattoos which cover her body. Once "unveiled," she performs a kind of Salomé's dance, her body becoming, as Kristen insists, "even in the midst of a gay party," the object of the (primarily) male guests' gazes. At the conclusion of her dance, she strips off her wig — a final veil? — and lands at the feet of an arriving male party guest. As Kristen's analysis suggests, the film seems disturbingly unselfconscious at this point, oblivious to its re-inscription of women's body as spectacle and fetish for both the hetero- and homosexual male gaze. And, as Kristen reminds us, this "sneaky" woman's "guilt" is ascertained by the audience when she is later "discovered" making love behind a shower curtain with a man other than her husband. The "stereotype" of the sexually excessive woman whose "guilt" is (in this instance) literally written on her body is one of the gay and straight stereotypes unchallenged by *Parting Glances*.<sup>23</sup>



Yolanda Bevan and Richard Ganoung



Kristen's recognition that the film marks the German heterosexual couple as "strange," "foreign," and "unsociable," draws attention to the curious way in which *Parting Glances* evokes ethnicity. Again, for a film which supposedly attempts to upend certain "stereotypes," there are, in *Parting Glances*, a number of disturbingly familiar representations of ethnic difference. As Kristen argues, the Germans are "exoticized," reduced to somewhat humorous spectacle for the largely white and male party guests; the husband actually expresses an "artistic" interest in death, providing the opportunity for another character in the film to call him a Nazi. Terry, the single African American male in the film, is merely a darker version of the white yuppies — muscular, gay law student by day, club denizen by night. Ethnic difference is in this particular case reduced literally to skin colour. Cecil, Robert's boss, is British. He constitutes a typical Hollywood representation of an Englishman — "effete," wealthy, caustic, and "closeted." Betty, Cecil's Indian wife, is given an "exotic" sexual past which includes two *menages à trois*, but is apparently denied a sex life with her husband. What makes these representations of ethnicity so problematic is not primarily that they are "unrealistic," but that they appear in a film which, according to its director and critics, purports to be "realistic." What both Natalie's and Kristen's critiques make clear is that the film seems to be flawed even when judged from within the (however problematic) realist ontology it presumes. In other words, neither Kristen nor Natalie are asking Sherwood to have made an avant-garde or anti-realist film in which the status of representation as such might have been called into question. Their attention to "stereotypes" in the film points to a certain failure on Sherwood's part which they can address from within the same critical apparatus or paradigm that the film seems to engage.

### The "Feminization" of Michael The "Masculinization" of Robert

The majority of our in-class discussion of *Parting Glances* centered around whether or not the film "feminized" the character of Michael. This was a position several students argued in their papers. As Tammy Roshell Poole wrote,

After viewing this film, I understand that within a gay relationship involving two men, one must portray the role of the woman while the other must maintain his role as a man.

When I first read the student papers which advanced a position similar to Tammy's, I assumed that students were incapable of reading a gay male couple in anything but heterosexual terms. I planned on pointing to this reading of Michael as "feminized" as an instance in which a certain reading paradigm brought to bear on a text produced a questionable reading, one which was not supported by a close reading of the text. My goal was to reveal to them the fact that it was their personal and cultural prejudices which had led them to read Michael in this way.

But what struck me about my students' readings were the multiple ways in which they argued their position. While some arguments merely fell into certain "stereotypical" understandings of femininity — Michael cooks and cleans for Nick, and so is marked as feminine by the text — other arguments compared Michael's behaviour to other filmic representations, and thus insisted that Michael should be read as feminine in light of these other representations. These students, working from ideas they had read in the assigned essays by Laura Mulvey and Richard Dyer, argued that

Michael occupied the place of the feminine "structurally," as "object" of "the look," as a character who, in contradistinction to Robert, is aligned repeatedly with other female characters, and whose body, again in contradistinction to Robert's, was "feminized" by the camera. These arguments were not easily dismissed by my accusations that my students' readings were a result of their heterosexual biases.

The work of class discussion became to understand some of the different strategies by which the argument was made that Michael was "feminized" (and Robert "masculinized") by the text. Specifically, we sought to critique those readings which subscribed unproblematically to certain essentialist notions of femininity, while also considering at length some of the other ways in which Michael was named as "feminine" in their readings. The problem became one of attempting to differentiate between our individual, (though culturally induced), idiosyncratic desires to "feminize" Michael, the film's "structural" feminization of Michael, and our cultural understanding of representations of femininity and Michael's relationship as representation to them.

It might be objected that Sherwood intentionally "feminized" Michael in order to draw attention to femininity as a cultural construction, and that this may in fact constitute a "radical" critique of culture's alignment of gender and biology. Unfortunately, 1) mainstream culture is already all too eager to read gay men as feminine; and 2) Sherwood's realist film style prevents him from drawing attention to the image of Michael as image. In other words, it would be hard to argue from the text of *Parting Glances* that the film is aware of some of the problematics of "realist" representation. If Michael is "feminized" by this film, this feminization seems to serve primarily to "help" the audience "understand" Michael and Robert as a couple — not to call into question femininity as a cultural construction.

In her paper on *Parting Glances*, Leanne Nyman describes Michael's physicality as "lean" and "boyish," as opposed to Robert, who is "muscular, athletic, and handsome." In the shower sequence, we see that Michael does in fact have a less "developed" upper body than Robert. The difference in the physicality of the two actors who play Michael and Robert was one of the factors which led my students to read Michael as "feminine." Obviously, there is nothing "essentially" feminine about a "lean" body, but culture does align muscles and masculinity, and there is a certain amount of cultural pressure on spectators, both gay and straight, to read the "less masculine" member of a sexual couple as "feminine." But more important than the physical differences of the actors' bodies is the way these bodies are structured into the film. The opening credit sequence emphasizes both a certain opposition between Michael and Robert, and a "feminization" of one and "masculinization" of another. As Tammy argues in her paper below, this marking of the characters as gendered occurs along a number of different axes. I want to quote Tammy's paper at length, because I think it argues persuasively for the necessity of moving beyond studies of "images" of gay men to an examination of the way those images "work" in film. There is, in Tammy's paper, one error which seems particularly significant. When describing Michael's body, she refers to him as "myself" rather than "himself." Perhaps she recognizes in Michael her own "feminine" place in culture.

... let's take a look at the opening scene [of *Parting Glances*]. Here, we have Robert, tall with blue eyes and a decent enough built body. He is jogging in the park, participating in some kind of action, of course, because as Dyer puts it, "he" is "there for his face and body to be gazed at,





Robert and Michael: John Bolger and Richard Ganoung

but his mind is on higher things, and it is this upward striving that is most supposed to please."<sup>24</sup> [Here, Tammy is quoting Dyer's description of the male pin-up, and, accurately, I think, relating it to the presentation of Robert's body.] Notice how during the whole time Robert is running, he pays no attention to Michael except only to jump over his legs that happened to have been in the way of his course. Michael, on the other hand, is sitting on the bench and reading a book waiting for Robert. The camera treats Michael as [if] he is the female object. Believe it or not, his whole position is actually supposed to be sexy for the viewer; legs crossed, head down so that he doesn't know that he is being watched, and the whole idea of him sitting by myself on a bench in a park makes him marked prey. After Michael gets tired of waiting for Robert, he begins looking for him, trying to put himself between Robert and his action, like Jane Russell in the scene where the men are working out in the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. [Tammy is drawing a relationship here between Russell's attempts to "disrupt" the Olympic team's workout in the musical number "Ain't There Anyone Here For Love," and Michael's desire to "disrupt" Robert's jogging.] Of course, Michael doesn't find Robert, Robert finds Michael, and jumps behind him as a surprise.

"Back at the house, Michael walks in first, becoming the object of Robert's look. Robert slowly kisses Michael on the back of the neck and Michael playfully refuses the affection. Like a man, Robert doesn't give up showing Michael that he wants him. Like a female, Michael plays hard to get and is a tease for Robert. Of course, Michael gives in and they make love. After sex, they take a shower together. In this scene, we see that Michael is in front of Robert and Robert has his arms around Michael. It looks like a hold of possession almost similar to the hold that Dan gave Beth in the film *Fatal*

*Attraction* . . . It is interesting how homosexuals fall into a man/woman relationship role . . .

"There is another scene that involves looking that puts Michael into the female role. The scene is at the record store and Michael is being admired by the salesman, Peter. Once Michael notices that Peter is looking at him, Michael returns the look for just one second and then drops his head back down quickly to look at the record in his hand. Dyer, again, wrote that, "in movies and on television . . . we have a close-up of him looking off camera, followed by one of her looking downwards . . . She has seen him, but she doesn't look at him as he looks at her — having seen him, she quickly resumes being the one who is looked at."<sup>25</sup> I find this quote fits this scene so well as Michael falls into the woman's role of being looked at."

To Tammy's analysis of the scene of Michael and Peter's meeting, I would only add that it is filmed in a very traditional shot/reverse shot format, in which Peter is "initiator" and Michael "object" of the look. It is significant that even in this scene, Michael is "feminized," though this time, it is in relation to Peter, rather than Robert.

In his analysis of this same sequence, Glenn Ricci relates the sequence to other Hollywood films in terms of its structure and content. Glenn provides a kind of anti-realist critique of the sequence, noting that Michael as image is "feminized" by certain cinematic conventions; he recognizes that Michael's "femininity" is a construction, and not "essential."

" . . . a scene in a record store showed Michael looking away from a male cashier [Peter] who caught him staring at him. The cashier has control of the 'look' at this point and starts a conversation with Michael who was shyly waiting for him to make the first move. Even though the cashier starts the conversation, Michael ends up awkwardly stumbling over



his words instead of taking control of the conversation like any self-respecting male movie character would. He seems to take the classic role that the woman takes in a movie — being the object of another man's look and not the bearer. This also happens later on at a party. A younger male [Peter again] makes many advances on him and many eyeline matches are shown going from him to Michael. This also makes Michael out to be the 'object' much like a female would become in a movie."

During class discussion, we mentioned numerous other ways in which the film seemed to "feminize" Michael and "masculinize" Robert. Michael acts nurturing toward his sick friend Nick; Robert can't deal with Nick's sickness. During the dinner with Cecil and Betty, Michael touches Robert's penis under the table with his foot, marking the "presence" of Robert's masculinity. (Tammy noted that Jennifer Beals makes a similar gesture in *Flashdance*. This gesture was repeated recently in *The War of the Roses*, also — in this instance, Danny Devito receiving the "footjob" from his girlfriend.) After dinner, Michael is paired with Betty, while Robert speaks, in another room, to Cecil. At the party later that night, Michael is paired with Joan — who is given at best only the suggestion of a sexuality in the film — while Robert sneaks off with Sara — a former girlfriend. Michael is the more "emotional" member of the couple; he becomes "hysterical" in the taxi when he learns of Robert's complicity in his job transfer, and cries during an emotional confrontation with Robert. Robert accuses him at one point of sounding like a wife. Again, I want to insist that none of these representations are "essentially" feminine, but in the context of the film, and the cultural context to which the film refers, we can readily imagine how these representations might be read as "feminine."

### They Are Just Like Us . . . The Celluloid Contradiction

In her essay on *Parting Glances* Angela Oshman notices a number of contradictions in the film. She argues that these contradictions arise out of the film's ideological project, which is itself contradictory. For while *Parting Glances* wants to portray a world in which "gayness is taken for granted," it also wants to create a "realistic" representation of gay sexuality. Angela realizes that "realistically," gayness can't be taken for granted in a homophobic culture. Here is her reading of the film's opening sequence:

Simply put, the filmmaker strives for both truth and political acceptance — for both a homosexual and heterosexual audience — and thus are born the film's contradictions. A prime example of the film's contradictory nature is its opening portrayal of gay sexuality as an aspect of "normal" culture by placing Michael and Robert in the park — as opposed to a seedy night club, etc. Robert is running towards a penile shaped government building. Michael is sitting on the plaza of this building. By so placing the characters, the implication would appear to be that gay men — gay sexuality, too — are accepted, "at home in," the phallogentric American culture. However, the couple does not embrace at the base of the "phallus" but instead runs circles after one another. It is only after they leave the "phallus" that they embrace. Thus, the contradictory implication that gay sexuality is not "at home in" or accepted by the phallogentric culture.

Angela's analysis acknowledges the impossibility of *Parting Glances'* project. The problem with the film is that it wants to represent a world in which gayness is taken for

granted to a culture which is virulently "homophobic" — a culture which is "repressed" in the film, but manages to "return" in extremely troubling ways, and a culture with which *Parting Glances*, and by implication, gay men, may sometimes be complicit. As Russo's reading of the film concurs, the film wants to "explore gay life without being about gay life."<sup>26</sup> Rather than interrogate this ideological project directly — a project which seems primarily to seek assimilation for gays into the existing structures of power — I would like to examine *Parting Glances* as an "effect" of that ideological project. Utilizing issues that arose from my students' writing and discussion of the film, I want to examine what happens when a gay film takes gayness for granted.

In order to make a film in which gayness is taken for granted, the film must re-create gay people in some cultural cinematic image of "straight" people — much the way Terry, the African American in the film, is "remade" as a gay yuppie who just "happens" to have black skin. *Parting Glances* creates gay people in a culturally palatable image through a series of "They (gay people) are just like us (straight people)."

*They are just like us in that they are affluent consumer capitalists.* This is the point brought out by Natalie's reading of the film's "stereotypical" representation of gay life.

*They are just like us in that women function as a spectacle for them* — a point brought out in Kristen's reading of the film.

*They are just like us in that their couples consist of "masculine" and "feminine" partners.* Thus the film's above-mentioned "masculinization" of Robert (and Peter) and "feminization" of Michael.

*They are just like us in that they hate sissies, too.* Russo reminds us near the beginning of his book that even faggots hate sissies.<sup>27</sup> Thus Douglas, marked in the film as "overtly" "effeminate," is humiliated, tied up, sprayed with whipped cream and decorated with flowers by Michael and Nick. Kristen reads this sequence as indicating that "gays do not want to be recognized as 'fags.'" Angela agrees, arguing that Michael and Nick "are taking out a male heterosexual audience's bigotry and hatred upon the stereotypically gay men and thus, they, though themselves gay, create a bond with the male heterosexual audience and thus are perhaps accepted."

*They are just like us in that their sexuality must be biologically determined.* At two points in *Parting Glances*, characters offer, jokingly, an explanation of the origins of homosexuality. Sara jokes that straight men have one less gene than gay men; Peter insists that his sexuality chose him: "I mean your dick knows what it likes. When you reach puberty, you don't fuckin' decide what sex you like. You ask your dick." A number of my students seized on these lines as "proof" that homosexuality was biologically induced. One student added that Michael's joke that Robert was a discredit "to the homo race" re-inforced this. My first response to this locating of homosexuality in biology was to ask my students why they gave these lines so much weight. I suggested that it might be their determination to "understand" homosexuality which led them to "believe" these characters. While the assignment invited them to imagine homosexuality based on this film, it did not ask them to account for its origins. I also reminded them that no one felt the need to explain the origin of the sexuality of any of the heterosexual characters we had viewed that semester — even though, as was the case with *Parting Glances*, they had been invited by the writing assignments to "read" that sexuality as a construction.



But I also realized that this location of homosexuality's origins in biology is not contradicted by an "evidence" from the text. Perhaps the characters in the film are meant to be taken at their word. Perhaps we are meant to "believe" that they "believe" what they are saying. Sherwood's "realist" film style does not encourage us to "distrust" them, nor to interrogate their cultural position. Michael and Sara's laughter, and Peter's inebriation, did not seem to discourage my students from agreeing with their statements concerning the origins of homosexuality. After all, the possibility that gay sexuality might be biologically determined is palatable to many people, both gay and straight.<sup>28</sup> One of the most effective means of "taking gayness for granted" is to attribute its origins to the biological.

I would argue that my students' desire to read gay sexuality as resulting from biology is another "ideological effect" arising out of the film's contradiction-laden project. The contradictions which surface from the film's attempts both "to explore gay life without being about gay life" and to represent "gay men" "realistically" were made most palpable for me in one particular student response to the film. This response demonstrates how the contradictions of the film's ideological project produce contradictions in the film text which are then reproduced in certain readings of the film.

Here is Damon Difabio's reading of *Parting Glances*:

The biggest thing we learn about the gay man in this movie is that he is as much a person as everyone else. Yes, of course he is different in his sexuality which, remember, chose him, but I now believe just as a DNA molecule can choose to mutate a baby at birth so can the molecule choose to give a man a preference for male sexuality. Homosexuals deserve as much respect and love as any physically mutated person, or unmutated person.

Damon's reading of the film is saturated with contradictions, contradictions which arise in and through the complex interaction of Damon, a historically and culturally specific

reader, and *Parting Glances*, a text marked by conflicting ideological projects. On the one hand, based on his reading of the film, Damon wants to argue that a gay man is "just as much a person as everyone else." On the other hand, his cultural knowledge of homosexuality forces him to admit that gay men are (culturally) marked as "different." On the one hand, based on his reading of the film, he wants to locate this difference in the purportedly "value neutral" domain of biology. On the other hand, the only language which he has available to him in which to account for biological difference is the language of "mutation." But he realizes that this language is not value-free, but requires him to figure gay men as "physically mutated" people, people who are *not* like "everyone else" in that something has gone "wrong" with their "molecules." Realizing that the language of biology has somehow forced him to re-inscribe, against his intentions, gay men as somehow "less" than "everyone else," he attempts to revise his reading of them by comparing them to both "mutated" and "unmutated" persons. Rather than choosing between these two "impossible" alternatives — the gay man as "mutated," impossible because it suggests there is something "wrong" with gay men; the gay man as "unmutated," impossible because it denies the cultural otherness of gay men — Damon speaks both alternatives at once, and thus contradicts himself.

Damon's reading is especially interesting in that it begins by parroting a certain liberalist agenda, an agenda I would argue is in keeping with the letter and spirit of both Russo's book and Sherwood's film. (Compare Damon's description of "the gay man" as "as much a person as everyone else" with Sherwood's insistence that his film is about "people not homosexuals" and Russo's call for films about "people who happen to be gay" rather than films about homosexuality.<sup>29</sup>) But in both Damon's paper and *Parting Glances*, the "repressed" fact of a rabidly anti-gay culture "returns" to produce in both texts a number of serious contradictions.



The late Bill Sherwood — whose recent death of AIDS cut short a promising career.



It might be argued that Damon's reading of the film arises exclusively out of his historical and cultural circumstances as a (presumably) straight man, and that he does not represent the intended audience for this film. But who is this film's intended audience? Sherwood's "realist" film practice, and Russo's "realist" reading of *Parting Glances*, do not examine the gay subject as a cultural and historical construction. Their projects assume that there is such a thing as a gay person who will automatically be capable of recognizing himself in certain cinematic representations, and who will respond "appropriately" to those representations. But we can imagine someone who might name themselves and be named by culture as gay who would respond to the film similarly to Damon.<sup>10</sup> We can't assume that a gay subject would "automatically" "know" not to "explain" his homosexuality in terms of biological "mutation." Because "homophobic" discourses speak through all of us in ways which we cannot always control, there is no guarantee that "positive" images of gay people will necessarily be read as such by gay subjects. Damon's reading testifies to the fact that it is impossible in a homophobic culture to define gay sexuality unproblematically. Sherwood's and Russo's realist ontology of representation and essentialist understanding of (homo) sexuality prevent them engaging, on all but the most superficial levels, with the problematic of the representation and reception of images of male-to-male desire.

\*\*\*

It might be argued that I have not in fact re-presented my students' readings of *Parting Glances* here, but have instead utilized their readings in support of my own, reading their readings *through* mine. I would counter this objection by insisting that my reading of the film developed in tandem with that of my students. I did not begin teaching my course with this particular reading of the film in mind. I chose to teach this film because it was readily available on video, and because I assumed that a straight audience would not find its representation of gay sexuality "offensive." As my students' readings of the film taught me, the film's refusal to treat gay sexuality as "offensive" to mainstream culture forces it to reproduce certain aspects of that culture which is presumably seeks to undermine. Yet, in its contradiction-laden project of attempting to erase gay sexuality as a cultural "problem," the film may actually produce in some readers a *recognition* of hegemonic culture as class-based, sexist, racist, xenophobic, and homophobic. Unfortunately, the film itself (if, in fact, we can ever posit such a thing), seems unable to recognize its points of complicity with that culture. Its "realist" film style seems ill-equipped to explore the ways in which its images might actually re-inscribe the very things it attempts to call into question. Or perhaps it is only a naively "realist" reading of *Parting Glances*, a reading insensitive to the film's contradictions, which would fail to recognize some of the profound consequences of "taking gayness for granted."

## Notes

Acknowledgements: Obviously, this paper could not have been written without the hard work, generosity, and cooperation of my students in Critical Writing and Film. Additionally, a number of other people at the University of Pittsburgh offered helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. They include Dr. Paul Bove, Dr. Lucy Fischer, Dr. Marcia Landy, and Richard E. Miller.

- 1 Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (NY: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 309.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 310. See also David Ansen, "When Being Gay is a Fact of Life," *Newsweek* 107 (June 9, 1986), p. 80; David Edelstein, "The Party's Over"

*Village Voice* 31 (February 26, 1986), p. 58; Judith Williamson, "Male Order," *New Statesmen* 112 (October 1986), pp. 24-25; "Parting Glances," *Variety* 322 (March 26, 1986), p. 28.

- 3 Russo, p. 310.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 311.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. xi-xii.
- 6 Christine Gledhill, "Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism," *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshal Cohen (NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 817-845.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 821.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 822.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 823.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 4.
- 12 Throughout this essay, I will be arguing that sexuality, homosexuality, and the heterosexual and homosexual persons are all cultural and historical constructions. This position is argued in a number of texts including Weeks, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (NY: Vintage Books, 1980); Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986); and Carol S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Explaining Female Sexuality* (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
- 13 Richard Dyer, "Don't Look Now," *Screen* 23, No. 3-4 (September/October 1982), pp. 61-73; Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head" and "On Fetishism," *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (NY: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 212-219; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 803-816; Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 222-244.
- 14 Normally, I do not "come out" to my students. I'm afraid that doing so would prevent them from expressing some of their "politically incorrect" views of homosexuality. Instead, an investigation of these views becomes part of the "text" of my course.
- 15 Russo, pp. 309-310. See also Sherwood's comments in Williamson, p. 25.
- 16 For example, Peter offers observations as to why he is gay; Sara tells Robert she knew he was gay before he did; Michael calls Robert a discredit to the homo race; Cecil describes making love with another man in a Bentley; Betty recounts her past *menages à trois* with two men; Joan suggests that a woman in a painting might be a lesbian.
- 17 Russo, *ibid.*
- 18 For a discussion of the relationship between disciplines and discourse see Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 215-237. For a discussion of the multiple and conflicting discourses which are activated in the course of students' writing in the university, see David Bartholomae, "Inventing the University," *When A Writer Can't Write*, ed. Mike Rose (NY: Guilford, 1985), p. 139.
- 19 See Ansen, Edelstein, and *Variety*, *ibid.*
- 20 Williamson, *ibid.*
- 21 Gledhill, p. 819. For an additional instance of this in terms of gay reception specifically, see Russo's and Wood's very different readings of *Cruising*, Russo, pp. 259-262; Wood, pp. 58-69.
- 22 Edelstein, *ibid.*
- 23 Obviously, my reading here is indebted to Mulvey's essay, *ibid.*, which Kristen also read, and did very careful work with that semester.
- 24 Dyer, p. 63.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 26 Russo, p. 309.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 28 For a discussion of some of the problems of biology as the origin of gay sexuality, see Weeks, pp. 96-123.
- 29 Russo, *ibid.*, quoted in Williamson, *ibid.*
- 30 This admittedly awkward construction "name themselves and be named by culture as gay" is an attempt on my part to honour some of the complexities of the concept of sexual identities — identities neither "freely" chosen, nor merely "enforced" by culture.



# Fugitive

## Details



Louise and mirrors: Danielle Darrieux in *Madame de...*

### READINGS OF IMAGE AND CONTEXT IN MADAME DE... AND LOLA MONTES

by Susan Lord

**T**he prostitute does everything . . . yet each of her acts (stories) reveals nothing about her. She does not give "her-self" to us, for she is always a reference to something else. The whore is here and nowhere at all, for when you have her, you have that which is not self-identical (woman-as-woman is never her own woman, always the reveries of men). The floozie is precisely the "corpse's presence" which is totally at your disposal, and yet always exceeds you ("a relation to the unknown").

Her form, mask, identity, is not the expression of some inner essence, but a response to the other's wishes. Her identity is the other's. As amorphous receptacle, capable of taking any filling whatsoever, this extreme of femininity that is the whore is even capable of containing masculinity.

— Jane Gallop, Intersections



What is the shape of a woman's historical subjection? Is it comprehensible apart from the ornamentation of her sex, the imbrication of representation and tradition, the nearness to the image? How does cinema negotiate these relations, "collapse agent and object and thus overdetermine the female body as a site of representation"? What are the vicissitudes of this overdetermination for "public" women, women who reside outside of the ideologies and propriety of the domestic sphere? How is the image, photographic and cinematic, worked to produce femininity as a pathology in the forms of the hysteric and prostitute-body? How has pathos been employed as the means of mediating and circumscribing the crises surfacing through these forms of femininity, these discursive excesses? If masquerade, or double mimesis, is a strategy for women to effect a distanciation from the naturalized relation between woman and image, what kind of cinema would emerge through an instigation of a similar strategy? These are questions which I do not propose to answer in any decisive way. I place them here as measures for an analysis of two films which are haunted by a similar nexus of concerns: Max Ophüls' *Madame de . . .* (1953) and *Lola Montes* (1955).

As this discussion proceeds I will have occasion to elaborate on the divergent aspects of these two films, but for the present I will briefly sketch a few similarities. With a mind to the fact that these are Ophüls' final films and that they were produced in Europe after his eight years in Hollywood (1941-1949, with *La Ronde* and *Le Plaisir* produced immediately upon return in 1950 and 1952 respectively), it is not surprising to find a critical resistance to melodrama and its "moral occult," as well as an elaborate analysis of cinema's structuring structures, its technology of desire. Although both films incorporate elements of melodrama, the "woman's film," historical romance and the biopic, these genres are skewed by an attention to the details of cinematic apparatus. In other words, these tales of the disturbance of meaningful structures (economic, social, subjective, metaphysical, etc.) are dialectically realized through the formal disturbances of vision, sound, point of view, narrative agency, etc.

Public forms of men and public bodies of women; high culture and ornaments of despair; merchants of desire (jeweler, ringmaster and filmmaker) and empty subjects; authenticity and masquerade; transcendental value

and the contingencies of detail: these antinomic 'ideas' are explored in both films within the context of the latter decades of 19th-century Europe. I begin with a discussion of the public woman in the 19th-century in order to reflect upon Ophüls' critical employment of such a figure within the cinematic convention of melodrama. From there I will analyse the two films in relation to the notion of masquerade and femininity, and the pathologies of women's desire.

## Public Bodies

... Since Buchner, the body's finitude, its characteristic ontological corruptibility and the aesthetic of fragmentation it induces, is crystallized in prostitution. . . . the woman's body, deprived of its maternal-body, becomes desirable only in its passage to the limit: as death-body, fragmented-body, petrified-body.<sup>2</sup>

As Christine Buci-Glucksmann intimates in this passage from her provocative essay "Catastrophic Utopia: The Feminine as Allegory of the Modern," modernity's metaphysical disintegration utterly transforms the symbolic significance of beauty and of love. No longer the auratic tie to universal value, love is materialized and with it the feminine becomes the cipher of death. Mallarmé's *Héroïade* is a stunning articulation of the mortification of this auratic virginal beauty, but it is Baudelaire, whose allegories of "petrified unrest," bring to form modernity's new "heroes": the prostitute, the lesbian and, of course, the poet, who identifies himself as both androgyne and prostitute. These heroes are such only insofar as they confront market relations negatively; this is especially true for the poet and prostitute, whose very lives are always in a certain kind of tension with the market. It is this very market value, this commodity life whose *peripeteia* (tragic turn) is determined by "irrational" forces, which gives these heroes a tragic dimension. Hence, the prostitute, "herself a victim, it was said, of a morbid heredity, represents woman's criminal inclination . . . In short she becomes the symbolic synthesis of the tragedy of the times."<sup>3</sup>

The "progress" of liberal capitalism and the accompanying shift in the conceptualization of the family from that of primary determinant in the sphere of production to that of primary determinant in the sphere of consumption assigned the *pater familias* with the function of mediating economic and moral value between public and private realms, thus ensuring the internalization of those public values within the family. It was this function, this mobility between these realms, which imparted

upon him the rights of citizenship and thus constituted his subjectivity. A central feature of this constitution was, especially in the French Enlightenment, informed by a sense of historical subjectivity: the bourgeoisie had become the free agents of history. And yet in this public world of "high capital" the valuation of "free" agency had come to depend largely on market value. Civilization had become the rationalization of economic and political power. This condition of rationalized power sets the stage for the deposing of a patriarchal authority once affirmed as a "natural" right. Hence, this authority is materialized and made subject to historical/economic contingency: the autonomy and free will of the individual is rendered illusory.

The illusory status of man's autonomy is brought into stark relief with the rise of prostitution, for the prostitute "conjoins a private morality and a social ethic . . . her sensuality in the private realm finds expression in the public . . ."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the prostitute's activity exposes the hypocrisy of a social ethic whose underlying tenet is greed and domination, an hypocrisy which, by extension, underpins the bourgeois household. In effect, the prostitute-body can be seen as confronting the bourgeoisie with the realization of the degree to which other human relations had become commodified relations. This form of exchange precipitates a further realization of the object nature of identity: the prostitute is not a "true commodity" (i.e. the object is not identical to itself because the prostitute's subjectivity is not exchanged) and hence cannot affirm that the buyer's subjectivity is autonomous. The anxiety over this lack of affirmation induces a "phallic undoing" which may be accepted (Baudelaire's prostitute identity, his "feminization") or rationalized through the dizzying labyrinth of legal and medical discourses constructed to insure difference, and hence immunity. And of course, it is the metaphysical (religious, ethical and national) values which are ultimately challenged. As work by Alain Corbin and Sander Gilman<sup>5</sup> verify, the construction of these discourses — the antidote to this evidence of commodified relations which extends from the boulevards to the nuptial bed — placed any public woman under the signs of pathology and criminality. Any woman who fell outside the domestic order and its property arrangements fell outside the public "order" as well (this is of particular importance to the private/public world of *Madame de . . .*). From the Salpetrière Clinic (both pre- and post-Pinel, but most markedly under Charcot) to the battery of infectious disease laws and police control, the public woman was made to pay dearly for the evidence her body brought forth. This criminality, these *mortal* laws, marked





A relationship that is 'only superficially superficial': Charles Boyer and Danielle Darrieux in *Madame de . . .*



the sex of any woman seeking release from the hypocrisy of the private realm. As Buci-Glucksmann points out, the counterpart to the *flâneur* is the whore.<sup>8</sup>

Just as de Sade's volumes are littered with corpses, so the literature and painting of 19th-century France is strewn with prostitutes and hysterics. The unyielding fascination for these bodies, which represent that which exceeds the limit of consciousness (death) and the limit of rational discourse (economic, legal and medical), marks a deep disturbance at the heart of the enlightenment project. These bodies then become aestheticized images of redemption and radical alterity, images of hope. But they are precisely "images," the eidolons which tell of the petrification of desire, the corpse which is "totally at your disposal and yet always exceeds you."<sup>9</sup> The double fascination in this relation between image and corpse seems to find its most spectacular realization in the cinema. It should be mentioned here that the whore and the hysteric not only have homologous relations to the discourses mentioned above, they also share an important place in the history of photography as institutionalized in the form of taxonomic "portraits" for anthropological, medical and legal purposes. A central figure in the development of this type of portraiture was J.M. Charchot, famous for his stage shows: the Tuesday lectures/demonstrations of hysterics. These performances were incorporated with the work done in his special photographic laboratory wherein he compiled an extensive collection of photographs of female hysterics in crises which he titled *Attitudes Passionnelles*. Here the image is meant to display the total collapse of meaning (the symbolic) into the materiality of the signifier, or the real "which is totally at your disposal and yet always exceeds you." Thus, cinema's "necessary censorship" can be seen, in part, as a complex and precarious inheritance. "Just as the transgression needs the taboo, Bazin insists that the cinema's erotic essence must be understood in relation to the censorship imposed not by institutional sanction but by the 'image itself.'"<sup>10</sup>

## Pathos

Significantly, discussions of the difference between melodrama and tragedy specify that while the tragic hero is conscious of his fate and torn between conflicting forces, the characters caught in the world of melodrama are not allowed transcendental awareness or knowledge. . . . It is as though the fact of having a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>

On the whole, the central issue in film melodrama involves the schism between consciousness and the overwhelming, overdetermined entrapment of pathos which is generally rooted in the terms of a bourgeois morality and epistemology. "As Bakhtin demonstrates [in "Discourse and the Novel"], 'A discourse of pathos is fully sufficient to itself and to its object. Indeed the speaker completely immerses himself [sic] in such a discourse, there is no distance, there are no reservations.' One might add that the situation of the receiver of the discourse mimics that of the speaker — immersion and loss of a well defined subjectivity."<sup>12</sup> Here, Mary

to the function of pathos we see how the whole problem of tragic guilt is in question: "to understand everything is to forgive everything."<sup>13</sup> It is in this very position that the viewer of melodrama is placed, a positioning which facilitates conciliation.

It is curious that Peter Brooks' study, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, is employed by a diverse range of theorists writing on film melodrama without critical attention being given to Brooks' underlying epistemology. It is undoubtedly a thorough study and a major contribution, but as I hope to demonstrate through the following



Louise and the jeweller.

Ann Doane directs our attention to the fact that, as does much critical literature on a film melodrama, such a mode of melodramatic expression is rooted in a literary and theatrical tradition of 18th-19th century Europe where a plethora of devices were developed to enclose the spectator and reader in a labyrinth of feeling through over-identification, thereby creating a mode of 'knowledge' or an authority for experience based upon sympathy and immediacy. The world closed in on a private sphere trembling with intrigue and dread where fathers disappear, leaving a household of virginal orphans hunted by evil and lascivious villains. The new social order, often in the form of the court of law, then makes its timely appearance to save virtue and punish vice. The protagonists of such dramas are often mere functions of their environments, and as such, lack autonomy and are ultimately not responsible for their actions. The ethics of the older dramas are dissolved into psychology and causticity, leaving little to question beyond an "analysis of the motives and a tracking down of the psychological road at the end of which the hero attains his deed."<sup>12</sup> If we tie this

quotations, there is an underlying faith in a "moral occult" which has a "real existence somewhere behind and beyond the facade of reality,"<sup>14</sup> and this faith is indicative of an enlightenment pedagogy and epistemology.

Like the oratory of the [French] Revolution, melodrama from its inception takes as its concern and *raison d'être* the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths. . . . It reenacts the menace of evil and the eventual triumph of morality made operative and evident. . . . It is in all cases radically democratic, striving to make representations clear and legible to everyone. . . . By enacting irreducible imperatives, melodrama serves to reassure a doubting audience of essential truths while its logic of the excluded middle acts to focus feeling into pure and immediate knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Of significant importance to this new mode of expression is the displacement of the hero by the heroine, hence we



have few examples of female protagonists who are not defined by an utter absorption in feeling or "pure and immediate knowledge." Here, there is not only a problematic therapeutic ethos operative for the culture as a whole, there is also a dangerous *glissement* (sliding) of female subjectivity into a naturalized and unmediated materiality where the possibilities of analysis, discourse and, ultimately of action are abolished.

This tradition of the melodrama surfaces in Hollywood and is refigured, or disfigured, as a complex disturbance of codes and conciliations in the 'woman's films' and 'family melodramas' of certain directors. In film's such as Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, King Vidor's *Ruby Gentry*, Charles Vidor's *Gilda*, von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus*, and Max Ophüls' *Caught* there is more at stake than a moral adjustment of a democratic world, or a revelation of a moral occult obscured by a surface of falsehood. What films such as these interrogate is the very creation and fostering of a therapeutic ethos of immediacy and sympathy which is "rooted in peculiarly modern emotional needs — above all a

gift of a television in *Heaven*, Dietrich's masquerade of femininity in *Venus*, Ruby's phallic gaze, Leonora's modeling of her entrapment as image in *Caught*: these moments (a brief few of the many) of reflection upon the production of identification in a world of consumer capitalism renders impossible any complete immersion, conciliation and suture.<sup>17</sup>

A central thematic shared by Ophüls' last two films involves merchants of desire and empty subjects. Ophüls' instructions to Danielle Darrieux (*Madame de . . .*) are particularly revealing:

You must, armed with your charm, your beauty, your intelligence that we all admire, embody emptiness, nonexistence. Not fill a vacuum, but make it incarnate. You will become on the screen the very symbol of futility devoid of interest. And you must do this in such a way that the spectators will be seduced and profoundly moved by the image that you represent.<sup>18</sup>

This image that she represents is one of reification, an embodiment of a world emptied of hope only to be filled

other characters the image or eidolon of petrified desire which is negotiated by the jeweler/ringmaster/filmmaker. The question of a moral depth distinguishable from surface becomes a pathetic fallacy. As both of these women attempt a life of difference through passion, memory or fantasy the surface of their bodies — their hysteria — enwraps them in death.

It is of some interest that these last films were made shortly before the emergence of France's *nouveau roman*, a literature of objects and surfaces which enacts Robbe-Grillet's statement that "everything is contaminated." Ophüls analyzes historically objectified relations, he attempts to make possible a mode of perception which unhinges the anthropomorphic measure and phallogocentric gaze, and most importantly for women who view his films, he denaturalizes identity and difference. The effect of this "style," Ophüls' Mannerism and mode of self-reflexivity approaches in the cinema what later develops in the novel. As Robbe-Grillet put it:

... in our modern society nothing is any longer *natural*. Not that there is even any reason to be upset about it. We can be quite happy, talk, make love, do business, wage war, write novels; but nothing of all this will any longer be done without thinking about it, the way one breathes. Under our gaze the simple gesture of holding out our hands becomes bizarre, clumsy; the words we hear ourselves speak suddenly sound false; the time of our minds is no longer that of the clocks; and the style of a novel, in its turn, can no longer be innocent.<sup>19</sup>



*Caught*: Barbara Bel Geddes and James Mason.

need to renew a sense of selfhood that had grown fragmented, diffuse, and somehow 'unreal.'"<sup>16</sup> Each of these films utilizes traditional melodrama's convention of device-production in order to create gaps, fissures and disruptions which work to overly strain or make dysfunctional the process of collapsing the agent and object of female subjectivity. *Gilda*'s striptease, Cary's

through the creation of desire on the market. This circumstance reaches an extreme realization in *Lola Montes* where, as Alan Williams states "if, for Lola, life is movement, then in the circus she is effectively dead, for it is precisely her capacity to move which is impaired" [MO, p. 143]. As pure object, pure image, pure cipher, pure surface, Lola and Louise present to the viewer and the

## Past Fiction

The mode of enlightenment civilization discussed in the previous sections is rationalized, and yet cannot be fully explained or controlled by its agents. As Barthes said, all order implies repression, and as we well know, the repressed returns and haunts the house. The production for exchange of commodities — a law of capital — produces and requires transgressions provided by the by the contingencies of use-value. Dimensions of this contradiction at the heart of market relations, and by extension, human relations also define 'consciousness' relation to itself. Freud's theorization of a consciousness which tears itself apart (a splitting which increases over time), and Marx's dialectical subject — the zero point in the contradiction between historical and ideological consciousness — are both vital to any understanding of the vicissitudes of



a modern self-consciousness which struggles to comprehend itself as ex-centric and contingent. And central to any discussion of this problematic modern subject is the question of how difference and identity are thus constructed. If gender is an instance of ideology where masculinity is encoded on the side of linguistic competence — the symbolic order — and femininity is made the mark of negativity and difference within that order, then what epistemological differences are required for analyses of self-consciousness?

This is a particularly difficult question when faced with a female protagonist like Louise in *Madame de . . .*. In his essay "Metaphor and Mimesis: *Madame de . . .*," Andrew Britton remarks that "Louise displays . . . the characteristic unconsciousness of the melodramatic protagonist — she lacks any means of conceptualizing her actions or the forces which determine them." [my emphasis].<sup>20</sup> Although Britton expands on the complexity of Louise's situation, and his overall work on the film is very revealing and enlightening, I find that there is something amiss, something not seen, in his analysis. By leaning in on his work I hope to track down the "blind spot."

If Louise imagines that 'I can do as I like with them [earrings],' it is not because she is deceiving herself, or failing to grasp the self-evident, but because the social relations which include her and the earrings, and within which the categories she employs to articulate her experience have been produced, present the earrings to her in a systematically mystified, or fetishized, form. [MM., p. 100]

It is not only the earrings which are presented to Louise in this form, but Louise is also presented to herself, through the mediations of social/sexual codes, in a systematically mystified and fetishized form. Now this double negation of agency, of critical distance, severely circumscribes the possibilities of a critical self-consciousness. Britton states that Louise's transgression — her sale of the earrings — is not located in a self-conscious desire to transgress, but comes about as if by chance due to the "objective contradiction in the relations of women and property." [MM p. 99] He implies that a self-conscious transgression — a "rebellious or rebarbative will" — would become manifest if she sued for divorce. As I have tried to outline earlier, such a 'choice' is no choice at all, particularly for a childless woman whose domestic legitimacy is already precariously positioned between the devil and the deep blue sea. Does it

necessarily follow from these social, sexual and economic interdictions that a critical self-consciousness is utterly absent for Louise?

Louise symbolically revokes her wedding contract — this trust which was meant to remove both she and the earrings from the market and from history — by selling the earrings back to the jeweler who had originally sold them to Monsieur de . . ., and it is this transgression which "initiates the movement of the narrative." [MM, p. 99] This transgression is possible due to the non-identical relation of Madame de . . . the property of Monsieur de . . . to Louise. And this incommensurability is shared by the other women: Nanny, Lola (M. de . . . 's mistress), the niece, and Louise's absent mother. These women have homologous relations to the market (they are all imbricated with exchange-value), as well as to history and narrative structures: in other words they are necessary to, and coded as necessarily passive within (as the jeweler says "we sell to men because of women," a phrase which also implies "we sell women to men") the economies of desire. Simultaneously, they are utterly incidental details in cursive and monumental history. I think that the relations (direct or oblique) between the women and their narrative functions are of tremendous importance to our understanding of Louise's character.

an "elsewhere" closes the film: in the final shot the earrings, a *gift* of Madame de . . ., decorate the pedestal of an icon we have never clearly seen. Importantly, by the time this image appears all religious or mystical import has been bled. "For that 'elsewhere' is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-offs, of its representations."<sup>22</sup> As the surrogate mother, Nanny reads cards, predicts the future and understands that hysteria is more dangerous than mere affect. Nanny's sybillance is not treated seriously and yet she reads the codes correctly. The vocabulary of chance is bantered by everyone and yet Nanny is the only one who recognizes meaning in fugitive details. In effect, she manipulates the apparently stable order of the Count's realm and passes this knowledge to Louise. Lola is Louise's "destiny": if Louise divorces she will become mired in the contingencies of the world of the whore. And as we see through the two nearly identical train sequences, where M. de . . . sees off his women, Louise is already enmeshed with Lola. The niece, fecund and impoverished, is the signifier of the other extreme of women's proximity to nature, her extreme remove from culture and the production of *meaning*. For the niece, the earrings only represent a temporary reprieve from material destitution, and

## Through the circuitry of relations between the women

there emerges an important possibility for an ulterior order of  
fantasy desire and agency . . .

The worlds of these women are riddled with details, and details are the bearers of contingency and death.<sup>21</sup> Nature and chance. Both realms are immediate, and it is in this immediacy that the women seem to dwell. But there is a range of mediations and codes which the women manipulate, masquerade in and consciously transgress. How is this to be represented in narrative/cinematic structures which rely upon the absence of such activity? Louise's dead mother is the first extra-diegetic referent in the film. She had possessed a form of knowledge which, passed from mother to daughter, exceeds and transgresses the laws of inheritance. This referent to

it is her need which furthers the undoing of M. de . . . 's authority. Through the circuitry of relations between the women there emerges an important possibility for an ulterior order of fantasy desire and agency, of methods and forms of determination and critical self-awareness. Here, the language of the (absent) mother functions to set askew the "naturalized" manifestations of the father's social, sexual, economic and discursive power. By looking at this film from the point of view of this ulterior order the persistent "blind spot" of femininity is rendered readable and less inchoate.

Ophuls' detailism is a pervasive the-



matic. In the opening shot we are lead, detail by opulent detail, through a collection of feminine aesthetic objects beginning with the earrings. (The question begged by this scene is: is there a "feminine" object which is not aestheticized?) A woman hums a lullaby, sings and talks with herself about which of these objects she should sell. She says: "Mother could tell me what to do." This voice has only gloved hands, ruffles and the glittering surface of femininity to substantiate it: in other words, this voice has no substance at all. The camera, following this voice, leads us to an image in a mirror of a woman who, holding the earrings to her ears, says: "After all, I can do as I like with them." The voice has no body, the gaze no object other than the image itself. As Britton remarks, "she appears, both to herself and to us, in an absolutely objectified form . . . The illusion of autonomy ["I can do as I like"] is nourished by the very image which demonstrates its insubstantiality." [MM, p. 99] This voice and this image are given a body only after the decision has been made to return the earrings (and herself?) to the market, and such autonomy is a fallacy. But is Louise capable of conceptualizing the vicissitudes of this condition? She moves swiftly from the Count's heavily invested gaze bearing down upon her from a portrait, to being scrutinized by the soldier in the church — a scene which deftly demonstrates the superfluous position of religious values. Finally, seated before the jeweler's controlling and curious gaze, she says: "Don't look at me." This fugitive detail is of importance as it rhymes with Louise's later statement to Donati: "I hate this world. I want to be looked at only by you." Britton's reading of this is revealing: "At the same time, as Louise, assigning the world to oblivion, dramatizes herself through the classical rhetoric of romantic love . . . she posits herself once more as an object for the male." [MM, p. 101] And, undoubtedly, she becomes subjugated by her passion for Donati, but I think it is important that she is always in full realization of her object status, whether it be as "hope" for some, spectacle for others, or as the signifier of 'life' for her husband (M. de . . . : "Our happiness is a reflection of ourselves, it is only superficially superficial."). In "choosing" from among these object-identities the one which "represents" the dissemblance of difference, Louise exposes the fallacy and hypocrisy of "this world" and thus effects the possibility for the desire of a different world.



Louise as Image.

## Masquerade

Costumes traditionally play an important part in the fetishistic containment of women on the screen. Moreover, along with make-up, accessories and other techniques of beautification, costumes have been a predominant focus of women's aesthetic impulse for centuries because women were barred from most other forms of expression. The aura of self-sufficiency Freud observes in female narcissism may be seen as the highly ambiguous result of this historical inversion of the aesthetic impulse. As a trace of women's exclusion from social signifying systems, however, it collapses agent and object and thus overdetermines the female body as a site of representations. Hence, while still testifying to the deflected impulse, the aesthetic-erotic effect of self-sufficiency is ironically linked to the cultivation of appearance and the reflection in another's gaze — mechanisms by which female narcissism conventionally plays into voyeuristic and fetishistic structures of spectatorship. [VP, pp. 102-103]

Miriam Hansen's exacting articulation of the duplicitous and dangerous relation of women to the image helps us understand the vicissitudes of Louise's intrinsic object-identity, as discussed above. The citation also permits me to approach an important aspect of

Ophuls' aesthetic: the interdependence of 'femininity,' masquerade and cinema. In his essay on Joan Riviere's theory of womanliness as masquerade, Stephen Heath makes a typically difficult and oblique assertion: "Max Ophuls [in *Madame de . . .*] again develops the masquerade as pure cinema, the hyper-spectacle of fantasy."<sup>24</sup> I would like to keep this statement in mind as I begin the shift from *Madame de . . .* to *Lola Montes*, a film which is 'about' cinema's intrinsic dependence upon the manufacture of femininity and its psychic weight upon 'a woman who . . .'

Returning to the glittering surface of Louise's vanity and the opulence of Monsieur de . . . 's estate, we see a disturbing homology, though inverted, between the formation of the two identities. The close space of closets, drawers and boxes containing earrings and assorted *bijoux*, furs, hats, a woman's voice, a lullaby, a bible, a cross, a mirror: we know the woman through the assemblage of parts, through her work of putting herself together. These details plus the room, the lofty stairs, the nanny, the various objects of 'high culture,' etc. takes us to a full image of Monsieur de . . . : a portrait with a heavily 'invested' gaze. Where the first glimpse of Louise is a partial image which is coincidental with her (partial) body (due to the angle of the shot we see part of her 'real' profile), the first glimpse of M. de . . . is also an image but one which implies concretion and indivisibility, he's already unitary: his disembodiment assures infallibility and temporal constancy. We see him 'in the



flesh' at the opera only after he commands silence ("shhh"). As in the portrait he stands above all others and his opera glasses stress the reach of his gaze. But his infallibility is always in jeopardy, his power and autonomy as Count, General, and patriarch are based upon a world of objects whose value is ultimately uncontrollable. In other words the Count's identity is based in a contradiction which only increases over time: his objects suggest permanence, i.e., that they reside in their status of being owned (Louise's object's suggest no such comfort), and yet the Count's objects are no more stable than Louise's — they only seem so under his steady gaze, a gaze which could not be steady apart from the objects. By the time we are delivered before the Count's portrait we have witnessed a tremor, a small fissure in the estate's foundation, a disturbance which grows greater each time the earrings are sold. This is superbly dramatized through the series of bedroom sequences. Louise is always lying in bed as M. de . . . commands the circumference of 'his' territory by the reach of his voice, gaze and actions. But each sequence shows that circumference contracting until his assertion of power is shown to be a pathetic contradiction. His sense of agency — economic, social, private — is no longer autonomous enough to maintain his necessary illusion of having control over the narrative's contours: *l'histoire de Madame de . . .* is hence closed.

I strongly agree with Britton's emphasis that M. de . . . , while he believes himself to be autonomous and self-determining of and within, the economic, social and political orders (recall his statement to the jeweler when he insists that he is only to give and never receive favours), he is in fact entrapped and subjugated by them. But there is also an ulterior world — the world of objectified and abject female desire, the world of women who sell themselves for bijoux — which the Count is impotent within: "the extreme of femininity that is the whore is even capable of containing masculinity." In fact, the only male figure who appears to maintain his "autonomy" is the jeweler, a figure of narrative agency who reappears in *Lola Montes* as the ringmaster. Both of these figures facilitate, maintain and reproduce the dominant codes of the phallographic social order which requires that women be objectified as passive, exchangeable ciphers of masculine, active desire. The figural position of the jeweler and ringmaster can be seen as homologous to position of the director of conventional Hollywood cinema which reproduces the "psychical obsessions of the society which produced it."<sup>24</sup>

Laura Mulvey's formative essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," remains one of the most inci-

sive reflections upon the underlying structures of classical Hollywood cinema's production of desire: the distinction between male and female subjectivity on the basis of vision, where the male is the bearer of the look and the female the object or image. This structuring principle underlies what she calls the "magic of the Hollywood style" where "the alienated subject, torn in his imaginary memory by a sense of loss, by the terror of potential lack in fantasy, came nearer to finding a glimpse of satisfaction: through its formal beauty and its play upon his own formative obsessions." [VP, p. 16]

Briefly then, this psycho-social dynamic of pleasure and fear at the sight of the female body must be bound through a repetition of the hierarchy of sexual difference: woman signifying absence of control, power, and privilege, man signifying unitary self-sufficiency. This is negotiated in cinema through the following means: scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect (ego gratification) is maintained through recognition and identification with a dominant point of view, i.e. the imagined source of the invested, productive gaze (imagined because the only truly productive gaze is that of the camera); and two solutions to the castration anxiety triggered by the presence of the female body. These two "solutions" are of particular importance to *Lola Montes*: fetishistic containment of the body (in

Father promises the little boy transcendence from. Through these two solutions — fetishistic containment (Mulvey calls these moments iconic cut-outs) of the female/mother body, in parts or as a whole, and the inquisitional narrative structure, the hero is able to leave the body, shred and bury the unbearable, disintegrated corpse which is the "face of the impossibility of recognition, the trace of irreducible distance." [I, p. 44]

As I hope to show through an analysis of a few moments in *Lola Montes*, Ophüls turns these two "solutions" into transgressions which make possible a viewing pleasure for the female spectator. Ophüls distantiates agent and object. Through a masquerade of cinema, he performs this distanciation on two levels: on the level of the film as a whole ("the hyper-spectacle of fantasy"); and, within it, through Lola's enacting in flashbacks what has been said about a Marlene Dietrich performance: "we are watching a woman demonstrate the representation of a woman's body." Kaja Silverman regards *Lola Montes* as a "disquisition about the status of the female image in classic cinema"<sup>25</sup> a statement with which I concur.

This film makes a spectacle of itself through its self-conscious dramatization of the conventions of classic Hollywood cinema, conventions whose economy is utterly inextricable from the manufacture of a spectacular femininity. It dis-



Spectacle and its choreographers: Peter Ustinov and Martina Carol in *Lola Montes*

whole or part) and a narrative of discovery wherein the woman is found to be sick or guilty — or both in the case of Lola — and then duly cured or punished. In both cases what is at stake is the sentient/contingent body which suffers and dies, a condition which the little boy is at much tied to as the mother, but one which the Law of the

plays an opulent and glittering surface of colour and light, it is a hyper-spectacle of modernity's obsessions and cruelties, and its excessiveness offers the eye no relief (that the circus audience is never objectified heightens the sense of entrapment and complicity).

The film's diegetic present is a circus wherein will be performed the "most



sensational act of the century" which contains "spectacle, romance, action and history," and which will deliver to us the "whole truth of an extraordinary life," the "scandalous career," the rise and fall of a *femme fatale*: Lola Montes. Lola's life is reenacted by "the entire company" with the ringmaster as choreographer. Complete with whip and provocations, the ringmaster calls upon the audience to ask Lola the "most intimate questions" which he facilitates and edits (i.e. "no questions about her mother") until he manages to evoke the one question which the design of the show depends upon: "how many lovers?" During this parade of suitors Lola is motionless upon a rotating platform, a circumstance which reaches its apotheosis in the finale, of both the film and circus act, when she is utterly contained within a cage after her perilous fall. And so, when asked why she abandons her lovers, the ringmaster's answer that "the *femme fatale* must move on" holds a pathetic irony and informs one set of antinomies the film addresses: fetishistic containment of women on the screen and the narrative movement utilized to discover the illness or guilt of the heroine and effect her cure or punishment. Ophuls investigates the crossover of guilt and illness: the audience is fascinated with her guilt, the ringmaster with her illness.

This diegetic present of the circus narrative is interrupted by flashbacks connected to Lola's consciousness. Her memories, her time, her narratives, and most importantly, her movements are contrary to those which the circus describes. The flashback sequences show Lola in motion: moving with her mother by boat, moving through the opera crowds, moving out of her horrible marriage, etc. As she states repeatedly "Life for me is moving on." This narrative verticality of the flashback is prompted by a stray question from the audience: "Does the Countess remember the past?" A lap dissolve of Lola's face, eyes closed, over a landscape takes us into the first flashback, which is importantly not the earliest chronologically. As Silverman points out, the discontinuity of the past's narrative, Lola's constant movement (even when contained in a coach) and, most importantly, her blatant exhibitionism where she makes a spectacle of herself and thus controls the male gaze, all work to transgress the codified structures operative in the circus, structures which mimic the conventions of classic cinema. These flashbacks, while more intimately connected to Lola, do not necessarily present the "truth." The effect of the circus' presentation of truth as a construction bleeds over into Lola's flashbacks. What the flashbacks do present is a mode of fantasy-memory which offers an alternate, but no less mediated, means of perception. In these

fantastic memories vision is often obscured by movement and architecture, lattices and shadows. The act of looking, of knowing the truth through vision, becomes a complex negotiation of mediations.

Freud said hysterics suffer from reminiscence. The more Lola remembers the sicker she becomes. The important sequence in relation to this is the flashback wherein the ringmaster visits Lola and offers her money for life. She refuses at this point but, as Silverman points out "we know from other signs of acquiescence that she will eventually capitulate";

... he tells her stop pacing and she does so — she submits, that is, to the restrictions which he verbally places on her movements, permits herself to be positioned by him ... [when told] that men come to watch her dance only because of her beauty she sits down in front of the mirror and regards her reflection, as if for the first time ... [she] submits to the look of another, is constituted through and dominated by the male gaze. [SS, p. 229]



Separation in marriage: *Madame de . . .*

From this memory on, Lola's deterioration in the circus is markedly evident. In the finale she submits to a fall which she realizes could be death. But it is perhaps the ringmaster's fascination over the degree of control he is able to exert upon her life that is most disturbing. What he wants to see is her death, and yet he is utterly dependent upon her being a *living* corpse. His life as a parasite, while sadistic to an extreme, ultimately displays his masochism. She has

become life for him, and there is no doubt that when she dies he will find or invent another spectacle upon which to transfer his sense of depravity. But his fascination is so complete that the closer she comes to death the more enveloped he becomes in the "real" (in the Lacanian sense of undifferentiated being — the utter lack of identity and, hence, the impossibility of recognition). The tremulous body which suffers and dies is no longer distinguishable from his own.

By returning to the terms of Hansen's article, Lola's submission to the masochism of female narcissism may be seen as the inversion of the aesthetic impulse (even if she was never a great dancer). This all-too-near relation to the body (the collapse of agent and object) is that of the hysteric. What Ophuls shows in this film as well as in *Madame de . . .* is that the hysteric's symptoms work the body to death. This form of "knowing," this embodied language, this aphasia of pure pathos, is induced through the psychic and historical imbrications of women's subjection to the position of "sole sight of desire." Of the various

strategies necessary for the overcoming of this condition, masquerade or double mimesis is one which continues to hold an important potential for me, not solely at the moment of the text but also in the lifeworld of desires and actions. Films like those of Ophuls open the possibility for recognizing cinema's potential for problematizing and reflecting upon the labyrinth of codes and discourses which form desire.



## Footnotes

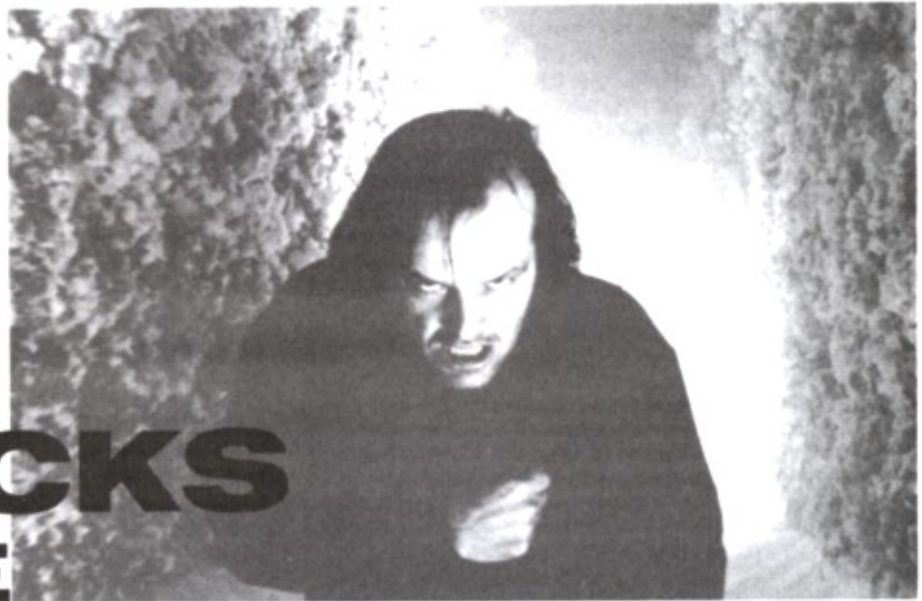
- 1 Miriam Hansen, "Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse," *New German Critique*, no. 31 (Winter 1984), pp. 102-103. All subsequent references will appear in the text as VPF.
- 2 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, "Catastrophic Utopia: The Feminine as Allegory of the Modern," *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 226.
- 3 Alain Corbin, "Commercial Sexuality in Nineteenth Century France: A System of Images and Regulations," *The Making of the Modern Body*, p. 212.
- 4 David Wallace, "Bourgeois Tragedy or Sentimental Melodrama? The Significance of George Lillo's *The London Merchant*," (unpublished), p. 11.
- 5 Sander Gilman's books *Disease and Representation* and *Difference and Pathology* have been very useful in this context, and Corbin has written extensively on prostitution in France.
- 6 Buci-Glucksmann, in "Catastrophic Utopia," makes a very complex and convincing analysis of the image of the prostitute-body in the work of Baudelaire and the subsequent interpretations of this work by Walter Benjamin. She argues that Benjamin's theory of modern allegory, as a mode of experience for modernity which he largely derives from Baudelaire, is utterly bound to the "massification" of women in the cities as prostitutes and factory workers (who were also driven to prostitution). She states that for Benjamin, "prostitution expresses the end of the aura and the decline of love" (p. 224) — central motifs surrounding his theory of cinema and mechanical reproducibility.
- 7 Jane Gallop, *Intersections: A Reading of Sade with Bataille, Blanchot and Klossowski* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p. 60.
- 8 Janine Marchessault, "An Erotics of Space," *Public*, no. 2 (1989), p. 93.
- 9 Much public discussion about the politics and pleasure of the cinematic image has ensued since Laura Mulvey's formative essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1973). Of particular relevance to this discussion is Mary Ann Doane's *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's*. There have also been numerous articles in *Camera Obscura*, *Screen* and, most recently, a collection of essays in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, a collection dedicated to melodrama.
- 10 Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk," *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 77, 79.
- 11 Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 177.
- 12 Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, Vol. 3, trans. Stanley Godman (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 91.
- 13 Hauser, p. 93.
- 14 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 202.
- 15 Brooks, pp. 15, 17.
- 16 Lynn Joyrich, "All that Television Allows," *Camera Obscura*, no. 16 (January 1988), p. 139.
- 17 Theorists whose work I've found particularly informing, other than those already noted, include Michael Walker, Thomas Elsaesser, Rosalind Coward, Janet Bergstrom, Steve Neale, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and, importantly, Tania Modleski.
- 18 Quoted in: Alan Williams, *Max Ophüls and the Cinema of Desire: A Critical Study of Six Films, 1948-1955* (Arno Press, 1977, 1980), p. 120. Any subsequent reference to this book will be referred to as MO. Williams offers an exhaustive analysis of Ophüls' later films. His work on *Madame de . . .* combined with the insights given by Andrew Britton (cited below) provided me with the challenging work of opening new perspectives on this film.
- 19 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1965), p. 94.
- 20 Andrew Britton, "Metaphor and Mimesis: *Madame de . . .*," *Movie*, no. 29/30, p. 99. All subsequent references to this work will appear as MM.
- 21 Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1987), p. 81.
- 22 Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 25.
- 23 Stephen Heath, "Joan Riviere and the Masquerade," *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Burgin, Donald and Caplan (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1986), p. 58. Riviere's theory of masquerade is a useful means of understanding the psycho-social dynamics of femininity. She argues that women, particularly public, intellectual women, use the social codes of womanliness to protect themselves from the punishments they fear due them (from the "father") for the (phallic) power they possess, a possession they have stolen from men. Luce Irigaray writes about this as a double mimesis. She says that women are the good mimics that they are because they have not been completely absorbed by the phallogocentric discourses which code them "feminine." Mary Ann Doane takes this one step further to suggest that a strategy of masquerade should be developed by women: a strategy she feels would effectively distance object (image) from agent (woman). This an appealing yet highly problematic politics of resistance, one which I struggle with throughout the rest of this discussion.
- 24 Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 15. All subsequent references to this work will appear as VP.
- 25 Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 226. All subsequent references will appear as SS.

# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

**CineAction!** is looking for submissions for the upcoming issue on Documentary Film. Articles should be typed, triple-spaced on 8½x11 inch paper, and must arrive at the address below no later than Sept 15, 1990.

**Cineaction!**  
**705-40 Alexander Street,**  
**Toronto, Ontario, M4Y 1B5**





# CRACKS IN THE KING'S ARMOUR

by Viveca Gretton

## Stephen King Stanley Kubrick & The Shining

To admit that one is doing critical work on the novels of Stephen King and the films based on them usually elicits two responses. From the academic community, with certain significant exceptions, the reaction is one of slightly amused bewilderment, or contempt: "How interesting. Of course, I don't read him," or "A feminist analysis of *Stephen King*? Why bother?" (Experience proves that the reaction can be more favourable depending on the slant one presents. For example, an emphasis on Stanley Kubrick rather than on Stephen King as the focus of study seems to confer an academic "legitimacy" on the project.) The other predictable response to a proposed study on King is one of uncritical enthusiasm based on the assumption that one is a fellow "believer." More often than not, such a response precedes a personal list of favourite "Stephen King films." However, these two divergent responses do share something in common. Both the elitist dismissal of King's work and the growing number of positive critical works published on King (which are quite often lengthier versions of the worshipful articles found in *Castle Rock*, the monthly Stephen King fanzine) are grounded in bourgeois critical assumptions that operate to suppress or obfuscate the political reading of a text.



While this present reading is influenced by feminist, psychoanalytical, and Marxist concerns, both the film *The Shining* and the novel *The Shining* will be examined in a broader context which further insists on a recognition of the inextricability of issues of race, class, and gender. Although its machinations are often invisible, the dominant ideology represents the single most powerful ideal of normalcy which enacts and sustains the exclusion, marginalization, and oppression of those who threaten its interests. While it has no single legislative or political arm, this ideal of normalcy, through its various and often hidden strategies, participates in the oppression of women, gays, blacks, and the working class.

Mainstream film and fiction, however, must not be dismissed as a simple and consistent reiteration of dominant ideology, even when, as in this case, the object of study is a body of work produced by a white, male director and a white, male novelist. Certainly, neither Stephen King nor Stanley Kubrick reflect radical/feminist sensibilities, nor do they even present positive alternatives for change. Yet, in spite of this, their work does reflect intense moments of disruption, resentment, and opposition that are not easily discounted or dismissed. Finally, the challenge of recognizing issues of race, class, and gender within any single critical methodology (for example, a psychoanalysis which would threaten to extricate itself contextually and practically from the concerns of a given constituency) will result in certain critical paradoxes, fractures, and hesitations as well as a continual questioning of our own critical procedures and terms of reference. While this analysis is, indeed, influenced by psychoanalytic theory, I am aware, for example, that the observations I make regarding the North American nuclear family in King's novel and in Kubrick's film in no way suggest a global application or relevance.

Of all the films based on King's novels to date, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) seems to be the work that demands the most respect in terms of its aesthetic and critical self-consciousness. Indeed, Kubrick's films have always evidenced a self-critical rigour, and in Kubrick's latest work, *Full Metal Jacket*, a tentatively positive trend continues as Kubrick applies this rigour to issues that incorporate, at least marginally, questions of race, class, and gender.

Other films based on King's novels deserve some mention here. While David Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone* (1983) may be the most moving film based on a King novel, an authorial study of Cronenberg's films can only stress *The Dead Zone*'s position as the single positive departure from his earlier films. The direction of *The Fly* (1986) and *Dead Ringers* (1988) indicates a return to the limited concerns of his earlier work. John Carpenter's *Christine* (1983) remains a failure because of its simplistic reduction of the sexual complexities suggested in King's compelling novel. While it is Carpenter's prerogative to streamline, excise, or compress, his film suggests no artistic engagement outside of, and beyond, presenting *Christine* as a simplistic opposition between good and evil. Though *Firestarter* (1980) and *Pet Semetary* (1983) are two of King's strongest and most disturbing novels, little can be said in favour of Mark Lester's *Firestarter* (1984) or Mary Lambert's *Pet Semetary* (1989).

With the possible exception of *Misery*, King's latest works, *It*, *The Tommyknockers*, *The Dark Half*, have been disappointing. *The Shining* (1977) remains one of King's most seductive and distressing novels and, despite the marked differences between King's novel and Kubrick's film, arguably, a study of *The Shining* can offer the most to critical analysis. Throughout the novels of Stephen King, the reinforcement of dominant ideology is constantly threatened and often sub-

verted by a series of contradictions that produce fissures and tensions in what appear to be seamless, reactionary texts. Where King's novels deal explicitly with political issues, the liberal position overtly presented in the text often thinly disguises a conservative or reactionary position (i.e., Randall Flagg, the satanic villain of *The Stand*, distributes radical literature as part of his programme for world destruction). The explicit references that are made with regard to political issues often carry no more significance than do the various brand-name references that King is noted for; feminism and Big Macs are virtually interchangeable as cultural markers that emphasize the novels' topicality. The possibility of a "dangerous" reading of King's work lies in its dramatizations of situations that threaten and ultimately undermine "normalcy," a normalcy prescribed by patriarchal values.

The purpose of horror fiction is not only to explore taboo lands but to confirm our own good feelings about the status quo by showing us extravagant visions of what the alternative might be.<sup>1</sup>

However, again and again novels such as *Pet Semetary*, *Christine*, *The Shining*, and *Firestarter* demonstrate that this supposed ideal state, "the status quo," is doomed, condemned to collapse under the weight of a repression that defines its very structure.<sup>2</sup> In King's novels there are no happy families and very few "good feelings" to "confirm." King's novels never explicitly suggest that the reason for the insupportability of the family as a happy unit is, in fact, due to the attendant pressures and repression necessary to, and resulting from the construct of the family itself. This is dramatized rather than stated.

When Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* opened in 1980, those who expected to see a "faithful" realization of Stephen King's material were faced with what was, undeniably, a Kubrick film. Negative analyses of this film appear to be consistently bound by the perception that Kubrick's personal vision and style conflicts with, or is incompatible with, the King material, or indeed with the genre itself.<sup>3</sup> (Conversely, David Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone* is often regarded as a successful "collaboration" of personal visions.) Though it is not my intention to refer to the King novel as the "original" text, I will examine the points at which Kubrick's film conflicts with or can be compared to King's work because of elements that are suppressed and/or added. The ultimate aim will be to assess the extent to which Kubrick's *The Shining* can be appropriated for radical use and the extent to which his personal vision subverts or upholds dominant ideology. Finally, this will be discussed in relation to King's novel. Of course, an evaluative conclusion about the success of such a "collaboration" (indeed, as with Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone*, King had nothing to do with the actual production of the film) may be inevitable. Again, I hope to be able to do so without the biases that structure King as the "real" author.

## The Films of Stanley Kubrick

Kubrick, unlike David Cronenberg, is not primarily identified as a director of horror films. His canon includes gangster films (*The Killing*), historical epics and adaptations (*Spartacus*, *Barry Lyndon*), war films (*Paths of Glory*, *Full Metal Jacket*), science fiction (2001: *A Space Odyssey*, *A Clockwork Orange*), and black comedies (*Dr. Strangelove*). In fact, *The Shining* is his only venture into the horror genre to date. Nonetheless, consistencies throughout Kubrick's work indicate a personal vision not constrained by supposed generic requirements. Indeed it has been argued



that Kubrick's *The Shining* is a self-reflexive questioning of the genre itself.<sup>4</sup>

Stanley Kubrick's films are guaranteed to create controversy. Indeed, the amount of criticism generated by his films is formidable. Despite divergencies within this criticism, almost all agree that Kubrick indeed is an *auteur*; his films bear a marked stamp which identifies each as a "Kubrick film." There is little agreement, however, as to the exact nature of Kubrick's personal vision. In an attempt to balance the critical struggle over defining Kubrick's personal vision, Thomas Nelson finds that Kubrick's films display "a wide diversity of subject matter and what appears to be a general rather than specific thematic and tonal consistency." Nelson suggests that these characteristics are for some "a roadblock to understanding and appreciation."<sup>5</sup> To a certain extent, this is correct — Kubrick's rather disparate canon to date seems to resist a definitive structure or purpose.

Nelson's attempt to counteract what he perceives to be restrictive critical attempts at definition continues in a tradition of mystifying or suppressing feminist/political readings, readings which would stand outside of an analysis of the explicit political content within Kubrick's films. Indeed, the critical tradition surrounding Kubrick's films reflects a privileging of masculine interpretation that concentrates on examining the "larger" issues and themes of his films in relation to Kubrick's attitude towards "mankind." The exclusion of a feminist interpretation of Kubrick's films suppresses the possibility for a genuine radical reading which would extend beyond an analysis of explicit political content.

The tendency for a masculine interpretation of Kubrick's films is understandable: the arena of masculine experience and discourse is almost exclusively "privileged" by Kubrick's films (indeed, one could count the central female characters in his films on one hand: Lolita and Charlotte Haze, Lady Lyndon, and Wendy Torrance). Within Kubrick's almost entirely male universe there is a marked antipathy towards

## The exclusion of a feminist

### interpretation of Kubrick's films suppresses the possibility for a genuine radical reading . . .

authority (an antipathy that appears to engender much of the political readings of Kubrick's work). Yet, while observations about these films' relationship to authority are often made, there is little attempt to identify the *nature* of the authority in question: technology, politics, exploration and imperialism, the law and prisons, religion, the military and warfare, medicine and clinical psychology are all masculine (though not strictly male) institutions or disciplines, and all subject to Kubrick's sceptical consciousness.

Kubrick's scepticism, however, does not indicate a feminist sensibility, nor does it make his films feminist texts. Yet the consistency with which Kubrick returns to the areas of masculine control or imposition and his presentation of their machinations as destructive and corrupt indicates an area that *could* be appropriated for feminist use. Furthermore, the marginalization of women, in certain significant instances, can be regarded as a commentary on the overall exclusion of women in Kubrick's films (for example, the German in *Paths*

*of Glory* and the Viet Cong in *Full Metal Jacket*).

To explore this further, a brief analysis of some of Kubrick's films is in order. The best way to approach Kubrick's *Lolita* is by reference to the masculine gaze. A common analysis of Humbert/James Mason's tragedy is that he fails to recognize that his object of desire is "unworthy." Lolita Haze/Sue Lyon almost without fail, is identified as a "false" object: shallow, duplicitous, and vulgar.<sup>6</sup>

While not entirely appropriable to a feminist reading (the pervading cynicism with regard to *everyone* in the film leaves few sympathetic identification points and suggests no positive alternatives), there are significant elements which dramatize feminist concerns. For example, the privileging of Humbert's point-of-view, as narrator and artist (he remains the first-person narrator throughout Nabokov's novel), is ironic, as is the supposed legitimacy of his poetic vision and sensibility. (In Kubrick's *The Shining*, the privileging of the artist's sensibility is exploded horrifically when Wendy discovers what, in fact, Jack has been writing — an obsessive repetition of the single phrase "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Compare this with Quilty/Peter Sellers' wry observation that Humbert repeats himself when he writes.) To accept Humbert's privileged status as narrator, artist, and lover is to ignore the points at which Kubrick aggressively undermines him. In Kubrick's film Humbert's narrative status is gradually eroded; his voice-overs eventually disappear as we watch Humbert being watched, while he in turn watches Lolita. Just as Humbert tries to control Lolita through the exclusivity of his gaze, he himself is subjected to the gaze in turn.

Kubrick's film is as much a dramatization of Lolita's resistance to appropriation — a refusal to conform to Humbert's passionate "artistic vision." She is exploited in every sense of the term: as sexual object, as "daughter," as autonomous individual, yet the question is not of her complicity in these arrangements (ultimately a question of *her* "moral" inferiority), but rather of her resistance. Lolita draws the line when she has had enough; she finally leaves Humbert, and she leaves Quilty when she refuses to appear in his "art" films. Lolita ultimately subverts the men who attempt to exploit her and preserves a certain autonomy within the limited options presented to her. Both men who try to control her die, prisoners of their attempts to control their representation of femininity, Humbert as poet/scholar and Quilty as director/actor. "Lolita" is a staged representation of their desire and neither, despite their obsessive attempts, access her "true" essence. The final shot of the film is the bullet-ridden portrait of a young woman (through which Humbert has shot Quilty), yet a further representation of femininity which enigmatically gazes back at us. Although the film evidences little sympathy for Lolita herself (she is not an anomaly within the film's cynical logic), the privileging of the male gaze remains, at best, problematic.

Kubrick's two subsequent films, *Dr. Strangelove* (1963) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969), present an exclusively masculine universe of politics, science, and technology. Both films, while considerably different in terms of narrative structure, present the products of masculine endeavour as ultimately destructive or doomed to failure (the nuclear arsenals in *Dr. Strangelove*, HAL, the omniscient computer in *2001*). While *Dr. Strangelove* is certainly *not* a plea for feminist alternatives, it certainly implies, if only by default, a connection between masculinity and world destruction through its satiric exclusion of women from the War Room ("I told you never to call me here!" whispers General Turgidson/George C. Scott) to his secretary/lover) and its, albeit satirical,



psycho-sexual locating of Colonel Ripper/Sterling Hayden's "malfunction" in repression ("Women sense my power — I deny them my essence") as well as in the image of Major Kong/Slim Pickens straddling the phallic nuclear bomb.

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the arena of masculine endeavour is extended from the global to "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite" and encompasses as well a "history" and future of mankind. Of all Kubrick's films, *2001* is the most obsessively exclusionary with regard to feminine presence and with regard to issues of class or race. The presumed universal "history" presented in *2001* is, indeed, a history privileged by white male interpretation. The deliberate mystification of the black monolith (a presence that exists outside of time and space, yet affects or controls man's destiny) has led to numerous speculations as to its meaning.

While the monolith's connection with the phallus has not necessarily gone unobserved, its significance is often obs-

### **The presumed universal "history"**

**presented in *2001* is, indeed, a history**

**privileged by white male interpretation.**

cured. A psychoanalytic interpretation that would align the phallus with language, with the Law of the Father, allows for a reading of *2001* as a dramatic interpretation of the metahistorical inception of language, of meaning itself, as a result of phallic intervention. What is ultimately ironic is that *2001* presents an unconventional narrative structure, exhibits anxiety in relation to masculine infallibility, and relies primarily on a non-verbal presentation to delineate a history of language and knowledge. While language itself is always presented as banal (the stilted and empty conversations between characters), the visual signifier of language, of the phallus (of the monolith) is presented with a striking sublimity. While the film's internal tension may stem from an attempt to convey the inception and intervention of language through the *absence* of language, one cannot really argue that Bowman/Keir Dullea's journey through "the infinite" and the suggestion of rebirth with the appearance of the Starchild in any way mark a return to the pre-Oedipal, to the feminine as Mother. Rather, to be brief, the final scene of *2001* asserts the *absence* of the Mother. The disembodied womb, floating in space, containing a fetus (almost universally understood to be male), is a striking realization of the fantasy of phallic self-regeneration. It is, in the last analysis, a masculine, technological parthenogenesis which excludes any participation of the feminine *whatsoever*.

Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* again presents an exclusively white, male universe.<sup>8</sup> Within this futuristic dystopia, all institutions (including the family) and all academic or scientific disciplines are revealed as corrupt or, at the very least, ridiculous. At the same time "politics" is represented by caricatured figures (supposedly encompassing the right and the left), again revealed to be corrupt, hypocritical, and self-seeking. Arguments as to where the film stands in relation to issues of moral or ethical choice, free will, inherent violence, good and evil, the dangers of facism or socialism etc., are essentially not to the point: Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* is rigorously nihilistic and its nihilism effectively abrogates cohesive arguments *within* the film's narrative structure.

Unlike the feminine exclusion of the two previous films, *A Clockwork Orange* certainly acknowledges the presence of women as well as gays. It is, however, presence as victimization (rape, attempted rape, and murder); objectification (women as furniture, Alex's pick-ups, the nude on his wall, the actress for the Ludovico presentation); caricature (Alex's mother, the psychologist, the prison inmates); and subordination (women and gays are sinisterly aligned with the system, the Ludovico technique, political conspiracy, and "rehabilitation"). Whereas questions of race are simply excluded, questions of gender and sexuality become part of the film's deterministic and corrupt universe.

As a "subversive" text, *A Clockwork Orange* offers little to a radical reading. The film does not even suggest the fissures of an incoherent text; in fact, the film is quite consistent: everyone and everything is rotten and will stay rotten. Ironically, this line of analysis in many ways echoes the negative bourgeois criticism generated by this film, a criticism that expressed horror with regard to the film's "immorality," its cynicism, and its irredeemably bleak vision. Therein lies a tenuous strength of the film — if *A Clockwork Orange* cannot be appropriated for radical use, it also resists appropriation by bourgeois humanist values.

Before moving to the central analysis of *The Shining*, it is important to briefly analyse an aspect of Kubrick's latest work to date, *Full Metal Jacket*, and in doing so isolate a subtle, yet significant movement with regard to the marginalization or exclusion of women and the suppression of the issues of race and class. While *Full Metal Jacket* is still structured within a primarily male universe, the film allows for a tentative reading of the final scene as a protest against this very exclusion. In discussing this, it is useful to refer to one of Kubrick's earliest films, *Paths of Glory*. Both films are, at least, explicitly anti-war and are centred on the brutality inflicted on and by soldiers. Again, while the universe of both these films is almost entirely male, both films end with the soldiers confronting a woman — significantly, a woman from the enemy side.

In the final scene of *Paths of Glory*, a young German woman, (Susanne Christian, Kubrick's wife) is dragged before a group of leering French soldiers where she is humiliated and forced to sing for them. As she sings (haltingly, in German), the soldiers fall silent and eventually begin to hum the tune with her. A series of close-ups reveals tears and strain on the men's faces. This scene is perhaps Kubrick at his most humanistic: the song provides an empathetic connection between male and female, French and German, and both "sides" are recognized as pawns of a corrupt authority that transcends national and sexual boundaries. The song provides a temporary respite from sexual humiliation for the woman and a delay for the men who are to return to the front.

Despite its analogous ending, *Full Metal Jacket* illustrates, if not the complete inverse, at least a fissure in this "reconciliation." Throughout their training, the Marines rifles are purposely identified both as extensions of the phallus ("This is my rifle, this is my gun") and as substitutes for women (the Marines are told to give their rifles a woman's name and are ordered to sleep with them).

An American unit lost in Vietnam is pinned down by a lone, female sniper who manages to kill three of their men. She is ambushed by Joker/Matthew Modine, though his gun jams as he scrambles to fire on her. The woman is critically wounded by another Marine and the men watch as she dies. She prays, then demands (in English) that they shoot her. One Marine remarks that there will be no more "boom-





**Full Metal Jacket**

boom" for her, echoing the only other two scenes in which women appear, significantly, as prostitutes. This woman, unlike the captive in *Paths of Glory*, cannot "sing" for the men — there is no "language" which will bridge the abyss between them (in the earlier film, the men need not even know the words of the song in order to understand the German woman). In *Full Metal Jacket* the woman can only appeal to her enemies for silence through death.

When Joker insists that she "can't be left this way," Animal/Adam Baldwin, the brutal grunt, challenges him to shoot her. The grunt, expected to do the dirty work, reverses the terms upon which the liberal intellectual tacitly assumes that Animal will "tidy things up." Meanwhile, the dying woman on the floor remains an enigma: her political commitment and her suffering remain "other" as we confront the emptiness of Joker's so-called politics. The final scene includes Joker's voice-over as he comments, not on the woman he has just shot, but on a woman he would like to fuck. The song that tentatively unifies in *Paths of Glory* becomes the ludicrous "Mickey Mouse" chant of *Full Metal Jacket*. As in the scenes where the Marines barter with the Vietnamese prostitutes, race, class, and gender intersect in the scene with the Viet Cong sniper.<sup>10</sup> She is marginalized to be sure, yet it is a self-reflexive marginalization and one that goes beyond simple exclusion, uncomplicated victimization, or objectification.

Throughout these brief analyses of Kubrick's work, one thing is clear: the extent to which Kubrick's films subvert dominant ideology is consistently problematic. While on one level his films reflect the obsessional concerns of a completely male-identified director, his universe is *also* consistently the

object of internal critical attack. Again, while his films are seldom appropriable to bourgeois humanist ideals, the sceptical political content within his films does not automatically confer radical status at the level of reading.

Kubrick speculated in an early interview about the future of sexuality:

we may eventually emerge into polymorphous sexual beings, with the male and female components blurring, merging and interchanging. The potentialities for exploring new areas of sexual experience are virtually boundless.<sup>11</sup>

It is significant, however, that Kubrick saw this eventuality coinciding with scientific advancement rather than with the undoing of repression. Indeed, a positive expression of sexuality (in any form) is simply absent in his films. Whatever sexuality occurs is presented as "sublimation" through violence, warfare, and nuclear destruction. Ultimately, much of any feminist analysis of Kubrick's work is, in fact, based on a central negation: women, gays, blacks, and working-class characters are all excluded, victimized, or objectified in Kubrick's universe, yet at the same time, the corrupt power structure is consistently dramatized as white, patriarchal, and capitalist.

Kubrick's films present "a world of shit" that is moving rapidly towards its own self-destruction. While the works of Stephen King present no positive alternatives either (the only tentative hope expressed in his later works is through a generally unconvincing affirmation of masculine childhood nostalgia), King's works, despite ideological constraints, do allow for a sympathetic identification with most of his heroes by what has been referred to as "a generosity of impulse."<sup>12</sup> With the exceptions of *Paths of Glory* and certain fissures in



*Full Metal Jacket* (parody and staged distance do not interfere with the genuine horror and sympathy that one feels for characters like Gomer, Eightball, or the Viet Cong soldier), Kubrick's films resist genuinely sympathetic points of identification. Identification is undermined by satire, staged dialogue (encounters that draw attention to themselves by their sheer banality), the audacity of promoting the least likely character as the "hero" (Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*), or by transposing emotional content onto an inanimate object (HAL in *2001*). The points at which Kubrick's sceptical detachment collides with King's obsessive intimacy in *The Shining* are precisely those points where Kubrick is able to access most thoroughly the latent subversiveness of his own sceptical consciousness. Significantly, this occurs within the arena of the family.

One can offer all kinds of impressive intellectual arguments against the family as an institution — its inherent authoritarianism, etc., but when you get right down to it, the family is the most primitive and visceral and vital unit in society . . . There are very few things in this world that have an unquestionable importance in and of themselves and are not susceptible to debate or rational argument, but the family is one of them.<sup>11</sup>

Kubrick's statement, though made many years ago, is perplexing inasmuch as nothing of this passionate declaration seems to have infiltrated his films, especially the two films which deal specifically with the institution itself, *Barry Lyndon* and *The Shining*. Indeed, if Kubrick holds any reverence for the family, it has certainly been well-repressed in his repeated portrayal of the family as corrupt (*Lolita*), irrelevant (2001), pathetic (*A Clockwork Orange*) moribund and doomed (*Barry Lyndon*), or murderous (*The Shining*).

## Kubrick "Meets" King

Keeping in mind the relative position of the family in Kubrick's and King's respective works, the best place to begin a comparative analysis of Kubrick's and King's *The Shining* would be at the point where Kubrick has chosen to suppress the most — his excision of the father's, Jack Torrance's, contextuality, his history, his memories, his dreams, all of which comprise a central portion of King's novel. To be sure, this has been a frequent observation about Kubrick's film: that Jack Torrance/Jack Nicholson appears crazy from the outset, without explanation, whereas King's novel painstakingly chronicles Torrance's descent into madness.

Clearly, Jack Nicholson's constructed star persona cannot be ignored in relation to Torrance's presentation. Nicholson's screen presence produces an entire series of associations with a particularly sinister misogynist "charm" (his patented "killer smile") and hints at a barely repressed violence that has imbued his previous roles (*Five Easy Pieces*, *Chinatown*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*). It is this which certainly informs his most recent performance as the Joker in *Batman*. Indeed, Nicholson's exaggerated performance in *The Shining* manipulates this iconography by drawing from his own screen persona to intensify, almost to the point of caricature, the misogynist violence that one associates with his roles. If the "rebellious anti-hero status of Nicholson, like Malcolm McDowell in *A Clockwork Orange*, promotes a subversive identification with the monster, one cannot ignore that the object of their attack is most often a woman.

Throughout King's novel, the reader is privy to Jack's thoughts, his dreams, his fantasies, his childhood memories, as well as his memories of events with Danny and Wendy. We are privy to Jack Torrance's rationalizations for his

resentment and anger, his agonizing guilt and remorse, and the points at which he confronts or represses the motivations for his actions. Often King's prose will indicate at what points we are to mistrust Jack (his circular rationalizations that fix upon phrases such as "I just lost my temper," or "It's not my fault") or where we are to assume that he is repressing or distorting an event or memory (the incident with George Hatfield), and conversely, at what points we are to believe he is telling the truth (his love for Danny). Significantly, much of what is presented as reliable is corroborated through Danny's ability to "shine."

In Kubrick's *The Shining*, Jack's internal psychological struggle is absent; only the external manifestations of his anger and resentment are dramatized by way of exaggeration and stylization. While King's novel allows the reader to assess the points at which Jack is a reliable or unreliable narrator of his own thoughts, Kubrick's Jack is posited as totally unreliable throughout and is a consistently unambiguous object of mistrust for Danny/Danny Lloyd, the significance of which will be explored later. While one might feel deprived of psychological insights into Jack's character, one must not overestimate or overvalue the "truth" concerning these insights within King's text. If King's novel allows for a sympathetic identification with Jack through a privileging of masculine self-interpretation (albeit one that is shifting, tenuous, or unreliable), Kubrick's film forces one to identify, through Jack, with a masculine subjectivity that is unambiguously controlling, dishonest, and violent. For example, when Jack gazes over the replica of the Overlook's maze, his point-of-view becomes a menacing overhead shot of Danny and Wendy in the real maze. All instances of Danny "shining" are in conjunction with the threat of or actual violence by the Father. Jack's duplicity is emphasized throughout: his image is repeatedly presented within the *mise-en-scène* in a mirror, and his sinister intentions finally revealed, invertedly, in a mirror ("redrum" as "murder").

King's novel insists on tracing father-son doublings: sons assume the patterns of violence of fathers and often actually become the father (Jack Torrance "becomes" his father when threatening Danny, Wendy often remarks how she "sees" Jack in Danny). King's novel dramatizes an historical, hereditary continuum of exclusive father-son love which is a mixture of painful adoration and violence. Regarding Danny, Wendy observes:

Danny had been Jack's for the asking, almost from the first . . . He loved his mother but he was his father's boy.<sup>12</sup>

After one of Danny's "spells" at the Overlook, Wendy again recognizes her exclusion:

At last Danny was quiet, only faintly trembling in her arms. Yet it was Jack he spoke to first, Jack who was now sitting beside them on the bed, and she felt the old faint pang

(It's him first and it's always been him first)  
of jealousy. Jack had shouted at him, she had comforted him, yet it was to his father that Danny said,  
"I'm sorry if I was bad." (126)

Wendy's resentment over her exclusion here is paralleled with her own mother's jealousy of Wendy's close relationship with her father: "Just as she had been her father's, almost from the first." (53) The difference, however, between the family "histories" is that while both Jack's and Wendy's indentifications with their father and mother respectively are presented as destructive, the relationship between father and child is the one that is presented as primary and essential.





Danny Lloyd in *The Shining* re-positioning the mother in Kubrick's film.

Further, the mother-child relationship is experienced as a pathetically tenuous phallic representation subject to loss, separation, or envy. At childbirth Wendy recalls:

It was a clear and distinct feeling, one she would never forget — the thing *taken*. (52)

Further, Wendy recalls her mother blaming her for her parents' divorce, for "stealing" her father, and now observes her mother's attempts to retaliate by "stealing" Danny from her control. The women are divided by their struggle over man and child and yet will ultimately have no influence over either: "If she felt she didn't know her husband, then she was in awe of her child." (52)

This apparent privileging of the Father in King's novel is further intensified when examined in relation to the properties of "the shining." Hallorann, in his discussion with Danny on "shining," observes that "all mothers shine a little," (88) an observation that suggests a relationship between "shining" and the feminine, in particular the mother-child relationship. Hallorann recalls being able to "speak" with his grandmother without ever saying a word. However, before positing the "shining" as a pure representation of the pre-Oedipal realm, the Imaginary, it is significant that Danny wishes that he did not have this ability as it often reveals terrible things to him. Further, these frightening premonitions or "messages" often manifest themselves as actual words, linguistic signposts that Danny is unable to read. In fact, Danny's fear of not being able to read these signs prompts his obsessive desire to learn to read, an enterprise organized by his father. The horror of the "shining," in fact, is the intervention of the Father, the intervention of language and representation onto the realm of the Imaginary. It is no accident that the most terrifying image that Danny accesses

through "shining" is that of the shadowy figure, a conflation of Fathers, pursuing him through the corridors of the Overlook with a roque mallet (phallus) to murder (punish) him, and thereby enforce the Law.

The appearance of Tony and his relationship to "shining" in King's novel and Kubrick's film are treated in significantly different ways. Tony, in the novel, is revealed to be an area where Danny can access his own mirror image; Tony is, in fact, himself. Tony's last appearance to Danny at the Overlook precedes Jack's final confrontation with his son. Tony's last message to Danny is that "You will remember what your father forgot." (420) The thing forgotten is the boiler's pressure gauge, about which Jack was warned ("She creeps"). That Danny saves himself and destroys the Overlook by metaphorically accessing that which has been repressed is paradoxically adjacent to his own repression of the source of his terror: he asserts that the monster before him is *not* his father at all, but a personification of the hotel. The novel certainly supports his observation: Danny's "real" father briefly emerges to declare his love for his son before being totally subsumed by the hotel's forces.

In Kubrick's film, quite the opposite is the case. Tony is never explained other than that he is Danny's imaginary friend who lives in his mouth. As in the novel, Tony reveals to Danny the danger of the Overlook. However, after Danny's crisis in Room 237 (Room 217 in the novel), Tony emerges as Danny's "voice" ("Danny's gone away, Mrs. Torrance") as Danny "himself" becomes catatonic. With Jack's first ax-blow to the door, Danny re-emerges to eventually lead his father to his death in the maze. If the maze is a symbol of Jack's unconscious, the metaphorical and literal site of his desire to murder his son, Danny has subverted the father by learning to "negotiate" the maze, by recognizing his



father's wish to kill him. Ultimately the maze becomes the site of Danny's Oedipal phantasy wherein he is able to isolate and kill the Father.

In Kubrick's *The Shining*, besides the exclusion of the family "histories," the genealogy of fathers, there is a notable absence of any affirmation in the father-son relationship. Where King's novel stresses the essentialism of this bond ("Jack sat looking down at him for a moment, and a rush of love pushed through him like tidal water . . . 'I love you, Danny,' he whispered. 'God knows I do.'" (128-29) and the subsequent exclusion of the mother, Kubrick's film dramatizes the father-son relationship as unambiguously threatening (Danny never represses, during the final pursuit, that it is, unequivocally, his father that is chasing him). For example, throughout the film Danny is positioned more often than not with his mother. When the ball associated with his father (Jack is seen hurling it against the wall in an earlier scene) rolls ominously towards Danny (who is alone and frightened in the corridors of the Overlook), he calls for his mother. There is no suggestion that Wendy/Shelley Duvall feels excluded from a bond between Jack and Danny. Such a bond, in fact, seems non-existent. The only scene of Jack and Danny alone together (other than the pursuit through the garden hedge maze) is entirely sinister.

In Kubrick's film, Danny enters the room to retrieve a toy and discovers his father sitting on a bed, dishevelled and staring blankly. When Jack beckons to him to come sit on his lap, Danny displays a marked fear and hesitation. The dialogue that follows is a sinister parody of fatherly love and concern. Jack's terms of endearments are ironically presented as false and threatening ("I love you more than anything in the whole world . . . I'd never do anything to hurt you"). Danny lays stiffly in his arms, responding to him evasively. When Jack says he is tired, Danny responds dully, "Why don't you just go to sleep?" Danny's tone indicates the child's wish for the father's death, his disappearance, rather than a wish to save or redeem the father, as is so clearly evidenced in King's novel. Kubrick's film completely negates the privileging of the father-son relationship, eliminating the possibility for affirmation on any level. His father echoes the terrifying invitation of the Grady girls to come and play with them "forever, and ever, and ever." The effects of this absence of a genuinely positive father-son relationship are manifested in the consequent re-positioning of the Mother.

In Kubrick's film, Wendy is not defined by her exclusion from the father-son relationship although she is still subject to victimization and resentment by Jack. Wendy is presented as initially docile, a caricature of subservience to Jack's needs. She meekly complies when Jack rages at her for interrupting his "work" ("Why don't you start right now and get the fuck out of here?") and is complicit in "covering up" for Jack (her explanation to the doctor for Danny's "accident" is almost the same as Jack's explanation to Lloyd/Joe Turkel, the bartender). She repeatedly warns Danny not to disturb Jack and excuses her husband's behaviour ("Daddy's just got a headache").

Despite this, at any instance when Wendy must act or make a decision she unfailingly takes control and succeeds. Wendy, alone, overpowers Jack (Danny assists her in the novel), she imprisons Jack (she panics and Danny must negotiate the doorlock in the novel), and, still alone, escapes the Overlook uninjured with Danny (she is critically injured in the novel and requires the assistance of both Halloran and Danny). Both King's novel and Kubrick's film dramatize Wendy as constrained by her role as wife and mother. She is associated with the kitchen (as is Halloran) and there is no

suggestion of any "significant" work that would extend outside of its parameters. (Although, in Kubrick's film, Wendy assumes Jack's caretaking duties as well: she is shown attending to the boiler while Jack is, in fact, never seen working as caretaker.) Wendy's expected role paradoxically demands subservience and passivity while subjecting her to violence and resentment as she attempts to fulfil these very demands. However, in Kubrick's film, it is Wendy who takes charge. Despite Jack's monstrous attack on the staircase, Wendy, with her baseball bat, wins the confrontation (in King's novel, although mortally wounded, Jack becomes a supernatural, unstoppable automaton). Ultimately, Kubrick's film allows for a more definitive assertion of Wendy's position. This assertion is more conclusive than the ambivalent victory of King's heroine.

If Kubrick's exclusion of the primacy of the father-son

## The intensity of emotion with which

King imbues the relations between men hints at repressions that the film does not address.

relationship radically alters Wendy's position in the conclusion of the family drama, the exclusion of yet other element adjacent to this drama suppresses the possibility of a radical reading at other levels. For example, while King's privileging of male relations ultimately excludes women, the intensity of emotion with which King imbues the relations between men hints at repressions that the film does not address. (Neither novel nor film addresses relationships between women with the exception of the novel's description of Wendy's bad relationship with her mother.) In King's novel, a significant event in Jack's life before the Overlook (the reason, in fact, for his dismissal from his teaching position) is his violent attack on a beautiful male student and his subsequent denial of the reasons behind this attack. In King's novel, George Hatfield becomes a significant point of horror at the Overlook, one which is specific to Jack alone.

George's unfinished phrase "*You hate me because you know . . .*" (114) returns to haunt Jack. George, the original prototype for the sympathetic hero in Jack's play, eventually becomes an object of resentment in Jack's mind. Jack's unresolved tensions with George are displaced onto Danny when Jack chastises his son for an apparent stutter, an echo of George's own speech problem. The novel seems to suggest that the significance of George is to function simply as an irritating reminder of Jack's professional failures and his potential for violence (Jack's car accident involving a mysterious, riderless bicycle foreshadows his murderous intentions towards Danny, and when George reappears at the Overlook in a "dream" he accuses Jack of trying to run him over).

Despite this, the ambiguity of George's unfinished accusation continues to echo in Jack's mind and suggests the possibility of a repressed desire that returns to express itself violently. It should be noted that the living corpse in the bathtub of Room 217 (a woman who killed herself after a lover's rejection) is never seen by Jack in the novel. However, what Jack *does* see (and it is only Jack who sees this) is George's grinning, naked corpse rising from the tub, reaching for him. Jack notes that George's penis "floated limply, like kelp," yet a knife "stuck straight out from his chest" and that "the wound was lipless." (271) Jack's intense observation of the



scene emphasizes a violent displacement of the phallus (his own) onto the body of George as well as an equally violent denial of his desire for George.

In Kubrick's film there are significant shifts in the location of and emphasis on sexuality and repression. Whereas King's novel allows, through its intimate and obsessive speculations on each character and by each character, for multiple readings of the Overlook as a site for the return of the repressed, Kubrick's film, while not reductive to a single interpretation, simplifies, or at least obscures some of the crucial conflicts presented in King's novel. This can be attributed, in part, to the attitude Kubrick's films bear towards sexuality in general. While they avoid the visceral disgust that evidences itself in the films of David Cronenberg (the only possible exception being the woman in Room 237), they evidence, nonetheless, a depressing and deterministic view of sexuality in any form. While Kubrick's films express little faith in the viability of heterosexual relationships, the complete absence of affirmation of *any* kind of relationship indicates a reluctance to explore arguments concerning sexuality outside of and beyond its use as an essential metaphor for male violence and destructiveness (although the first half of *Full Metal Jacket*, to be fair, comes much closer to dramatizing how the brutal enforcement of repression contributes to this destructiveness).

As discussed earlier, the absence of any father-son affirmation in Kubrick's film ironically allows for a greater reassertion of Wendy's character. However, because of the absence of affirmation in the relationship between Jack and Danny, and the absence of the explicit friendship between Danny and Hallorann/Scatman Crothers (indeed, Danny remains distant and reserved in Kubrick's film), a conflict central to

King's novel is suppressed, a conflict which dramatizes, however unconsciously, the restrictions that are placed on men to repress love and affection for one another: "Jack felt a wave of nearly desperate love for the boy. The emotion showed on his face as a stony grimace." (36) Further, there is (outside of reflexive endearments) little suggestion of any sexual life between Jack and Wendy.<sup>15</sup> Danny's "shinings" never include happy visions of his parents while in the novel: "He was glad his mommy and daddy were happy and loving each other." (70)

In Kubrick's film, almost all of Danny's "shinings" can be linked in some way to the Father. Even the appearance of the Grady girls, at once inviting Danny to "play" while revealing their bloodied corpses (with Father's axe in foreground) recalls the previous "caretaker" and father, Grady, who murdered his wife and children. The only non-threatening "shining" is when Hallorann offers Danny ice-cream (although Hallorann will die at Jack's hands later in the film). Danny "shines" in conjunction with the actions or presence of the Father: with Jack's job acceptance, with Grady's murdered daughters, merging with Jack's experience in Room 237, coinciding with Jack haranguing Wendy, and revealing Jack's axe-murder of Hallorann. What is significant in Kubrick's film is that, for Danny specifically, the horror of the Overlook is confined to images that relate exclusively to the actions of, or the implied violence of Jack, unlike the "historical" and autonomous evil that Danny is often privy to in King's novel (e.g., the gangland slayings, the general "awakening" of the hotel).

Jack's "shinings," however, do incorporate the supernatural entities that exist at the Overlook. However, they appear always in conjunction with his resentment and anger with



Scatman Crothers as Dick Hallorann: Otherness subsumed by the supernatural.



Wendy or Danny.<sup>16</sup> Just as Danny's visions coincide with the Father's violence, Jack's visions coincide with the resentment and hostility he feels towards his wife and son. The only time the hotel "shines" independently is when it comes alive (after Jack and Danny have left) to reveal its horrors to Wendy. One image that assaults her, the dogsuited man engaged in fellatio, figures prominently in the novel as a character that reveals himself only to Jack and Danny. He is, primarily, a homophobic externalization of repressed fears. The dogsuited man threatens to castrate Danny (as the fire-hose/phallus menaces him with rape, also absent in the film). For Jack he appears as a metaphor for the degradation Jack experiences working for his supernatural "employers" at the Overlook. ("Roll over. Play dead. Chastise your son." (352))

Both novel and film communicate the contempt that the hotel "management" holds for Jack as the "hired help," although King's Torrance is openly resentful of the cringing servility he is forced to affect in order to "get ahead" in his job. King's novel emphasizes the parallels between Jack's resentment towards his employers and benefactors (Stuart Ullman, Al Shockley) and his resentment when the "hotel" undervalues his work. Bearing in mind the horror that King's novels already invest in the working class, Jack's rage and resentment as an "artist" forced to work for "officious little pricks" as a caretaker becomes crucial. If one abandons a psychoanalytic approach for the moment, the novel suggests that Jack's failure may indeed be rooted in a legacy of brutal fathers, but more specifically, a legacy of brutal working-class fathers (Jack's father is described as a slovenly, alcoholic brute who works in a job traditionally considered "women's work"). When Jack offers Ullman an explanation as to why Grady murdered his family (he was an uneducated, and therefore a "stupid" man), it is meant to be at once ironic in view of what is to occur and indicative of Jack's own intellectual pretensions. Yet one cannot ignore how King's novels consistently invest violence and brutality in the working class; it is a legacy of violence to which Jack is ultimately subject.

While King's novels can support a radical reading through a psychoanalytic analysis of gender stratification, the family, and the effects of repression, his novels inculcate and reinforce class anxiety and prejudice. Again, if one cites Jack's working-class "legacy," we see his repeated failure to qualify as a member of the middle class. Although he shows promise, he fails at teaching (unlike Johnny in *The Dead Zone*), and, as well, fails creatively (unlike Paul in *Misery* or Bill in *It*). King's novels ask us to identify with the artist intellectual (who, in bourgeois tradition, stands outside of class considerations); Jack is, after all, a published writer with promise. Further, we are asked to pity Jack's degradation to the position of caretaker and to feel contempt for the exchange he permits of his creative project for the pathetic aspiration of becoming "manager" of the Overlook.

The caricaturing of class structure in Kubrick's film is consistent with his other work. The middle class is incessantly parodied, the working class is marginalized or victimized, and the upper class (the "jet-set" of the Overlook) is murderously perverse beneath its veneer of civility. Kubrick's films reflect a pessimistic and static view of class relations. In *The Shining*, the (black) working class will *not* save the day (Hallorann is summarily dispensed with), the middle class will "achieve" the aspiration of upward mobility (Jack's tuxedoed figure incorporated in the photo of the affluent guests of the Overlook), and the corrupt upper class will endure (the Overlook is *not* destroyed). Kubrick's pessimistic and cynical perspective does not necessarily confer upon his films a radi-

cal sensibility. However, *The Shining* does resist the central identification with the angst of the intellectual hero. Jack is presented as a caricature of all classes; he exists at once as an eternal member of the Overlook's "elite" as well as a mixture of middle-class pretension and working-class stereotypes.

King's novel insists on presenting the Overlook as a site for an autonomous supernatural presence (Hallorann actually sees the evil as a black shape which flies out of the hotel as it burns), and it is a presence which is activated by the arrival of the Torrance family. Part of Jack's descent into madness involves his obsession with the Overlook. He plans to write a book about its history, legacies, and legends. Kubrick's film is paradoxical in that, while it fixes the Overlook as an enduring site of evil (the last frame incorporates Jack in a photograph dated 1921), the emphasis is upon the specificity of the family drama as a site of violence and the violent undoing of



Stanley Kubrick on the set of *The Shining* (1980).

repression. Indeed, Jack's obsession with the hotel's history is summed up in a single shot of the scrap-book which figures so prominently in King's novel. Further, Jack's resentment of the pressure of his "work" is set within the Overlook, a site for eternal "play." "All work and no play" is a significant example of the resentment Jack feels towards the demands made on him as a man. This resentment is taken out upon his family and, specifically, Wendy, whom he accuses of not understanding his "moral and ethical" obligations.

Certainly the hotel itself is scrutinized, and its historical legacy is at least partly integrated into the horror of the film. The topography of the hotel, its maze-like corridors in conjunction with its dizzying proportions and isolation only emphasizes the claustrophobic quality of the family interaction. In King's novel, the hotel is destroyed, a purification by fire; in Kubrick's film the hotel is an enduring structure, frozen in time (as Jack dies not by fire, but by ice), and one that incorporates yet another Father into its legacy.

In King's novel, the destruction of the Overlook and the removal of Jack effects the re-formation of the family in a radically altered form. The violent Father is displaced by a beneficent figure of as yet undetermined status. It is suggested that this new Father is not subject to the repressive forces which structure the traditional family, nor will he enforce a Law which suppresses instinctual urges (such as thumbsucking): "That's all right, son. And if that thumb likes your mouth, let it go where it wants." (85) Though the future of





**Shelley Duvall as Wendy Torrance: Kubrick's resourceful woman.**

this arrangement is tentative and uncertain, King's unwillingness to specify its exact nature, to define it in traditional terms, indicates the possibility for an affirmative, if indeterminate, growth. While King's novel insists on the presence of a supernatural evil that actually possesses a "voice" (the hotel "speaks" directly to its characters), the novel's ultimate conclusion supports a tentatively radical reading that stands apart from its overall insistence on an external evil. (The insistence on the wasps' nest metaphor with the "single group intelligence" of an essential evil is abandoned by Kubrick.)

Kubrick's film eschews the possibility of a restructured family (we never see what happens to Wendy and Danny after their escape although the film in its original form apparently included a scene of Wendy at the hospital). Hallorann appears only to deliver the snowcat and will not figure in a restructuring of the family, however tenuously. While King attempts to incorporate issues of race in his novel implicit in the radical restructuring of the family of his ending, Kubrick marginalizes Hallorann; Jack simply murders him. Whether this can be seen as a pessimistic vision of the violent exclusion of blacks or a mere continuation of Kubrick's exclusion of race as a significant issue remains indeterminate.

In King's novel, racist reality is certainly acknowledged, yet the immediate threat of the supernatural (the evil of the Overlook) supplants (or suppresses) any concerns about racial tensions. The very idea of otherness, of the significance of difference, is subsumed by the supernatural. Though King's novel gives Hallorann a specific emotional and contextual resonance, this resonance is dependent upon his

appropriation as a benevolent helper to troubled white characters.

In assessing the extent to which Kubrick's *The Shining* and King's novel respectively support or subvert dominant ideology, one can say that while both works study the family as the site of repression, with a concentration on the murderousness of the Law of the Father, both works are strikingly different in tone, and reflect the often divergent concerns of two very different authorial presences. King's novel may be more open to a radical analysis with regard to sexuality and the effects of repression because of the lack of inhibition with which he allows us to enter the thoughts and dreams of his characters — an area that Kubrick suppresses. Kubrick's grotesque caricature of Jack as Monster reflects his obsession with destructive masculine authority and resists any affirmation of, or reconciliation with the Father. Unlike King's novel ("You're not my daddy" (426)), Kubrick's film does not repress the identity of the Monster.

King's material does not in any way transform Kubrick's obsessions except to locate them specifically within the realm of the family wherein Kubrick's sceptical consciousness isolates the nature of the authority that his films attack so rigorously and consistently. Predictably, his particular scrutiny of the Father results in his strongest female character to date (his only female character who manages to subvert or resist victimization). However, this is not to suggest that Kubrick has improved on King's material, nor does it suggest that Kubrick's film is less complex in what it offers to radical analysis. Ultimately, one is left with a critical trade-off. Where King's book offers a radical reading through its unin-



hibited presentation of sexual neurosis, Kubrick's film offers a radical reading through its relentless scrutiny of an unambiguously violent male subjectivity. King is unabashedly sympathetic with his characters; Kubrick is stringently skeptical and detached. King's emotionalism and Kubrick's cynicism do not meet in *The Shining*. Each work operates according to its own internal logic, and each work stands separately according to the obsessions of its author.

## Endnotes

- 1 Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkley, 1983), 282.
- 2 See Robin Wood, "Cat and Dog: Lewis Teague's Stephen King Movies," *cineACTION!* no. 2 (Fall 1985): 39-45.
- 3 Some of this criticism comes specifically from King himself. In *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds. Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1988), King describes Kubrick's film as a "great big gorgeous car with no engine in it" (143). Also, Jeff Conner, in *Stephen King Goes to Hollywood* (New York: New American Library, Plume, 1987) states that "academics" such as Kubrick and co-screenwriter, Diane Johnson entirely missed the point of the novel, and that the shift of emphasis from the supernatural to the disintegration of the family unit provides little more than "subtextual wonderment" for "high-brow semiologists." Indeed, Kubrick's film did provide for various interpretations of *The Shining* both as an examination of the family and as a critique of North American capitalism, imperialism, and exploitation.
- 4 See Harlen Kennedy, "Kubrick Goes Gothic," *American Film* V, no. 8 (June 1980): 49-52 and Paul Mayersberg, "The Overlook Hotel," *Sight and Sound* 50, no. 1 (Winter 1980/81): 55-57. For an example of a recent and excellent film that has certainly been influenced by *The Shining*, see Joseph Ruben's *The Stepfather*, 1987.
- 5 Thomas Allen Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 4.
- 6 For an example of a such reactionary analysis, see Norman Kagan, *Cinema of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1972). This passage remains unchanged in last year's updated edition. Kagan states:  
It's too bad in a way that Kubrick didn't explore the full implications of Lolita's constant duplicity — he might have come up with a funny, much more insightful version of *Breathless*, with its romantic hero and hollow, semi-psychopathic seductress (106).
- 7 Unlike, for example, the genuine sympathy one feels for Madeleine/Judy/Kim Novak in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), who is subjected to the controlling gaze of Scottie/Jimmy Stewart.
- 8 The only black character in *A Clockwork Orange* appears in a single shot during a scene at the Korova Milkbar, as part of an effete male couple. Presumably, the suggestion is that gays and mixed couples add to the general "perversity" of the bar's clientele.
- 9 The "Cat Lady" is exaggeratedly associated with the *vagina dentata*. As Alex thrusts the plaster-cast phallus at her mouth, a quick succession of cuts to details of paintings includes a gaping mouth with multiple and exaggerated sets of teeth and a vagina during masturbation. It is no accident that it is her objectified phallus that Alex uses to kill her, or that her own choice of weapon is a bust of Beethoven. However, rather than any kind of affirmative figure, she is placed well within the logic of the film's cynically corrupt universe. Structurally, the art that fills her house (various female nudes) is more aligned with the film's attack on the bourgeoisie ("I'll teach you to break into *real* peoples' houses!") and bourgeois artifacts ("Don't touch that — it's a very *important* work of art") than to any insight into a feminine art.
- 10 Eightball, the black soldier, comments wryly when Cowboy sends him out first to check out the area ("Yeah, put a nigger behind the trigger"). Yet when he is subsequently brutally wounded and stranded, it is Animal, the most vocal racist, who ultimately challenges Cowboy's order to pull out without him. Later, after Cowboy's death, Animal informs Joker (who made him the butt of his intellectual barbs) that he is "fresh out of friends." It is during their own shifting conflicts involving race and class that they confront the new variable implicit in the Viet Cong's presence. The three scenes involving women punctuate the "Vietnam" second half of the film: at the beginning, the middle, and the end. The first two are extended scenes of barter between prostitute and soldier (staged metaphors for exploitation on every level) with the final scene echoing and commenting on the previous two.
- 11 Eric Norden, "Interviews with Stanley Kubrick," *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*, ed. Jerome Agel, (New York: New American Library, Signet, 1970), 346. Orig. pub. in *Playboy* 15, no. 9 (September 1968): 85.
- 12 Robin Wood, "King Meets Cronenberg," *Canadian Forum* LXIII, no. 735 (January 1984): 36.
- 13 Norden, "Interviews with Stanley Kubrick," 347.
- 14 Stephen King, *The Shining* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977; New American Library, Signet, 1978), 53-54. All subsequent references to the novel will be indicated by page number within the text.
- 15 Thomas Nelson, in his thorough, yet disappointing reading of *The Shining*, perceives what he calls the "sexist" nature of Jack-as-Monster, yet goes on to make the extraordinary statement that it makes perfect sense that Wendy is presented more as Danny's mother than Jack's lover because "Shelley Duvall is not a sexually attractive woman" (216) and that somehow, her "unattractiveness" explains the scene in Room 237.
- 16 Lloyd, the bartender shows up to listen to Jack expound on his troubles with "the old sperm bank," to sympathize with his recounting of Danny's "accident," and to provide "words of wisdom" on the status of women ("Can't live with them, can't live without them"). Grady/Phillip Stone, the "other" caretaker who has murdered his daughters and wife, has a conversation with Jack (significantly, in the men's room of the Overlook, recalling the men-only War Room of *Dr. Strangelove*) about the necessity of "correcting" wives and "willful" little boys who "prevent one from doing one's duty." As well, he alerts Jack to the impending arrival of Hallorann ("a nigger cook"). Much of the dialogue between Jack and these characters is taken almost verbatim from the novel. However, the first time Lloyd appears in the novel, he is not externalized — the conversation takes place in Jack's mind. Unlike in the novel, Kubrick's Lloyd never reveals himself as a waiting corpse to Jack. With his sinister veneer of civility, he plays straightman to Jack's vulgarities.



# PEDAGOGY IN THE PERVERSE TEXT



by John McCullough

*A filmic image . . . What is it? A lure . . . I pounce upon it as an animal snatches up a "lifelike" rag.<sup>1</sup>*

**Analysis Interminable  
(. . . on the stakes of pedagogy):**

**T**he film is no longer the limit of the text. In whatever way it is approached that objective presence once construed as such can only be the dream of itself. It can only be a remnant of the process of disintegration which a conscious (eg. the academic) institution is system-bound to deny. The film is a remnant not in a forlorn sense but in the manner by which a cloth is stained, discoloured, dyed, sewn, ripped, ripped further, sewn again, doodled-upon, thought about, patched, missed (the formalists' noting of the "remnants of reality"); always already written. This shred and every shred is never, in its length, the limit of itself.

The text-things (the remnant, the cloth, the shred, the filmy piece) are disintegrated and uninterested. Their investment in themselves and others is partial and passing — here is their seduction. They invite return — in this scenario transgression is a measure of anticipation and never the move beyond a line-limit. The rag heap draws us near — we are unconcerned



with primacy of meaning despite, or because of, our intrigue with this filmy text and the texts (patterns) cut into it here and there.<sup>3</sup>

All these text-cuts are scars on the surface of something which may have been (dreamt) the virgin-movie. Are these scars the signs of plurality, textual laissez-faire? We realize the opposite. They are not about atomistic analysts — they are heavy with privilege claims. They coagulate, shifting into low-gear as pedagogy. The ploughing of mass minds demands a gearing-down. (Can there be a hi-gear pedagogy?)<sup>4</sup> The cuts are made more or less deeply, more or less broadly, but they are never the first cut or the last. They are scattered as nodes here and there.<sup>5</sup> Our cuts will be here and there as well but they will not specialize in the texts of Chandler or Faulkner or Hawks or even the film-noir generally. We will aim at the knot of sexuality in the texts of Michael Walker and Annette Kuhn<sup>6</sup>; recent remarks on narrative and sex which are intended to claim insight and to posit meaning for the much-scarred remnant *The Big Sleep*.

### The Eternal Return:

As there is no hard-and-fast line between telling and showing, either in the literary narrative or in psychoanalysis, the competent psychoanalyst deals with telling as a form of showing and with showing as a form of telling. Everything in analysis is both communication and demonstration.<sup>7</sup>

To invent is not to produce, but to translate.<sup>8</sup>

In learning, we are situated in relation to a narrative which always offers us something new; more in the sense that we propose an opening in us than something done on the text side. A narrative's completion is always *somewhere else* and 'something new' is not the new of "not existing before, now first made, brought into existence . . ." (OED) but more in the order of hypomnesis: learning (is) a new perspective. And this learning is nothing but the endless return to signs as guideposts: "those signs which, as in the detective story, appear as *clues* to the underlying intentionality of event."<sup>9</sup> We are looking for clues which will represent us. "If repetition is mastery, movement from the passive to the active; and if mastery is an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to — choice, we might say of an imposed end — we have already a suggestive comment on the grammar of the plot, where repetition, taking us back again over the same ground, could have to do with the choice of ends."<sup>10</sup> We are always in the position of the detective: asserting the text as a crime to be solved. But detectives never solve a singular crime for they come to realize that the crime they have been paid to solve is an overlap, residual, supplemental effect of crimes past, present and yet to happen. There is no solution despite syntagmatic constriction — the detective is an entity-between.

Instructing and investigating are overlapping maps of a middle defined by indeterminacy, vagueness, confusion, growth, perversion, touching, sucking, spewing-forth and other such *unpleasure*. They repeatedly deny the end (of one's participation) which is imposed by the realization "that everyone owes nature a death."<sup>11</sup> While the tendency of the system (body and institution) will be to conservatism, the end and beginning coinciding ("occupy the same portion of space; occur at or during the same time . . ." (OED)), the middle becomes the potential abyss of interminable meanings. For the detective, a transaction is not simply one of payment (beginning) being expanded by deed (ending). The transaction is considerably more complex. What is more

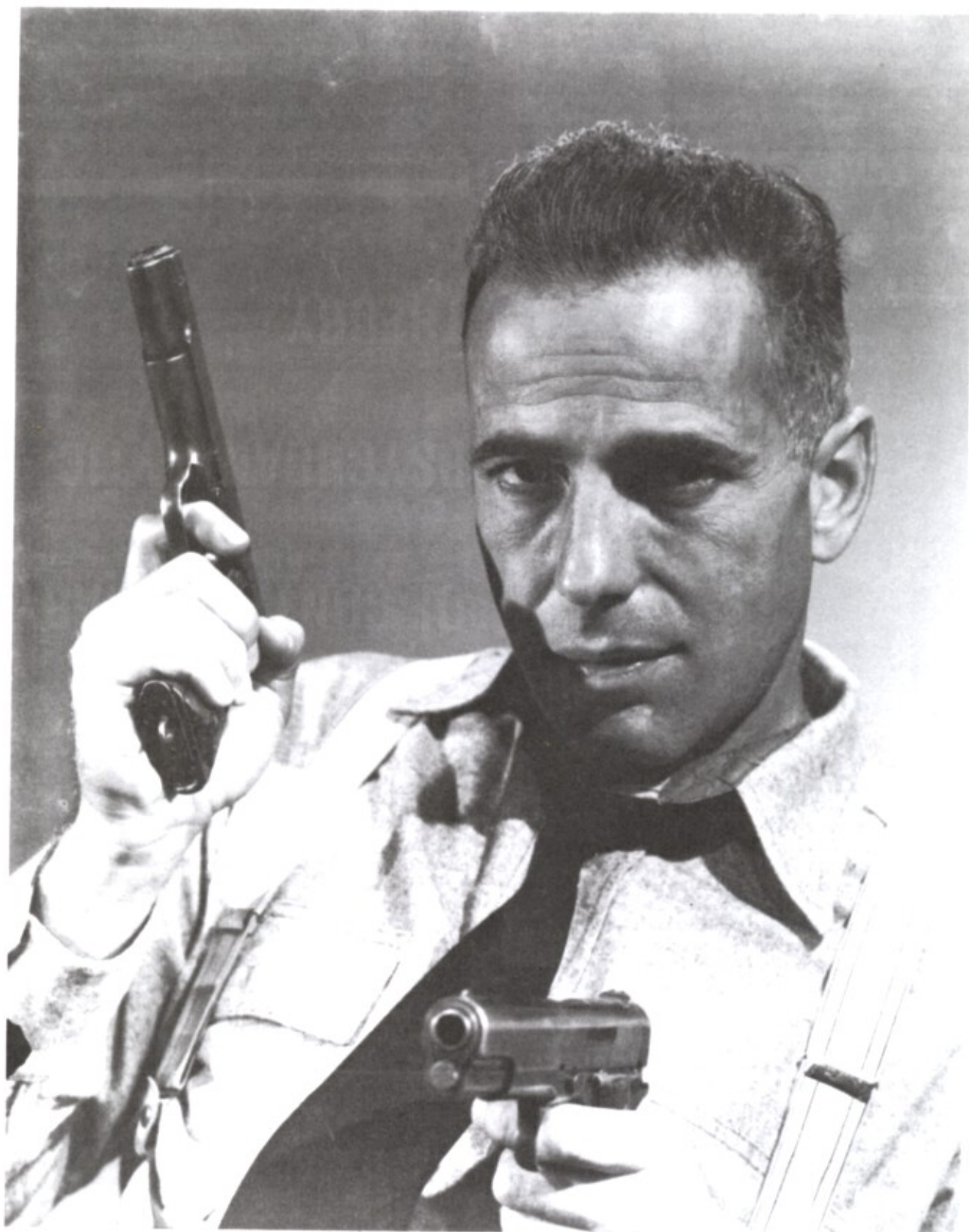
probable than a narrative of beginnings and endings which defines the detective is the proposition that the detective occupies the middle exclusively without ever receiving a payment which must simply be repaid (by discovery, solution, death). Although Marlowe will perform these transactions (maybe even in the belief that he will reach an end) he will never get outside the world of sign-posts (semiosis) which describes his existence. Is it any different for the pedagogue?

### "An obsession for understanding":

We believe that the detective is 'in the middle' throughout the narrative. That is, Malowe in this filmy-text, *The Big Sleep*, has little in the way of beginnings (he 'starts' as a detective and this implies that he enters life as the supplement to all other detective narratives) while his termination, the narrative end, is in the nature of a *pre-scripted* normalcy — he is in love with and loved by Lauren Bacall.<sup>12</sup> The narrative imposes a choice of action that is not necessarily sustained by the preceding activities of the text. More precisely, the ending is a text onto itself which surfaces and over-powers the detective-text; this is the 'civilizing' text, that which is constitutive of repressive mechanisms. The perversions of the middle are suppressed in favour of a *social* ending: "... under the influence of education and social demands, a suppression of the perverse instincts is indeed achieved. . . ." While Freud asserts that instinctual life (the perverse) is never satisfactorily contained, the genius of the classic film-text is that it closes-off the perverse text by asserting the text of *normal* relations (eg. heterosexual romance). From the fascination with multiple choice texts the movement is consistently towards a non-choice text (ie. pleasure as security).

The detective in *The Big Sleep*, then, is really only himself apart from the ending. He becomes something less/more than himself with his resolution as object-choice ("I guess I am in love with you"). And while the film ends with this *marriage* inscribed as its focus there is no denying our fascination with Marlowe's investigation (the text-without-ending). It is through him that we come to investigate the perverse, the unsettled and the potent. We are repeatedly seduced by the demand to 'see more', to 'know more' which will manifest itself as a process of peeling-back layers of text. *The Big Sleep* is crucial in this respect for all authorial voices involved with the project have repeatedly denied an ability to account for plot symmetry. Although Kuhn ultimately discards narrative as a sight of "confusion" in the film-text the implication (for Walker in particular) of these disavowals is that Marlowe's ambivalence as to object-choice serves as wish-fulfillment.<sup>14</sup> We are Marlowe to the extent that he is a text which will always be vacant. That he ultimately chooses Bacall (narrative closure) over endless investigation requires that we leave the text unsatiated. We will return to it for the thrill of the investigation; more specifically, we will return because we have been titillated by the threat of madness and chance. In fact, like Marlowe, we verge on becoming the obsessive neurotic, fired by doubt and compulsion: "... I must insist upon the view that neuroses, whatever their extent and wherever they occur, always succeed in frustrating the purpose of civilization, and in that way actually perform the work of the suppressed mental forces that are hostile to civilization."<sup>15</sup> The imposition of the end-text does not deny the lure of the perverse texts: "Furthermore, by a sort of *regression*, preparatory acts become substituted for the final decision, thinking replaces acting, and, instead of the substitutive act, some thought preliminary to it asserts itself with all





Humphrey Bogart — early '40s publicity still



the force of compulsion. According as this regression from acting to thinking is more or less marked, a case of obsessional neurosis will exhibit the characteristics of obsessive thinking (that is, of obsessional ideas) or of obsessive acting in the narrower sense of the word."<sup>16</sup> We will come to be obsessed, along with Marlowe, with specific scenes and this obsession to think repeatedly of the scene, to interpret/analyse interminably, will require that narrative performance will be less persuasive than textual immersion. We return endlessly not to find the lost object once and for all but to remind us of the variety of choices we did have before the imposition of the civilized text of "I guess I am in love with you." Formulated as in anticipation of the naturalized conservatism of instinctual life in Freud this 'un/pleasure of the text' is rendered by Brooks: "The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated *detour*, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of the narrative."<sup>17</sup>

For the moment, and in effort to give example to the obsessive repetition encouraged by the perverse text, let us look at Orr's favoured point of return: the scene in the alley.<sup>18</sup> Briefly, it is the beginning of the end for Harry Jones who arranges an exchange of information which will provide Marlowe with a significant clue; as Marlowe arrives for the exchange he is witness to Jones' death. It is this scene and its rupture of narrative symmetry that provides Orr with his analytical entry into the text. He will proceed to claim that "the film must work to displace this lack [Marlowe's height in this case] onto the figure of 'little Jonesie' and then to disavow it" and that "what Jones represents, then is the passive, 'female' side of the protagonist's nature" and finally that "violence toward the castrated male and Marlowe's complicity in that violence originates in their fear of women as castrator". Our interest is not so much with Orr's thesis but with the incision that he makes into the text. He is fixated by a scene embedded in the perverse text and he works it over until some sense of meaning arises from it. In this case the meaning of the "scene in the alley" is thoroughly infused with a social text (disavowal of the castrating woman) which will come to play itself out in the conclusion. Orr's investigation, then, is an attempt to reduce the difference and ambivalence of the perverse text to a moment of conservatism co-extensive with the *desire for the end* cited by Brooks.

For Orr, immersion in the text is a process of recuperation of meaning, of mastery over dissymmetry. The intent is to become author of a point in the perverse text and while this may sound like a betrayal it is nothing of the kind. A betrayal would be the avoidance of the reading, the disavowal of an attempt to collect meaning. So this is no betrayal but neither is it a success. Within any text, the thesis can never succeed: this from our point of departure (which will only be the point of arrival) which claimed that "the film is no longer the limit of the text." The civilized text may have an intent so obvious (ethical, moral, legal, historical) that it is excruciating to continue to read but even here there is something which escapes. The perverse text, certainly, is never exhausted by meaning and while there are strands from it which will be supportive of a meaning these will never account for its charm or its interest. We are always in the throes of repetition and being there we simulate the detective, mimicking his more-or-less serious flirtation with obsessive neurosis: "The histories of obsessional patients almost invariably reveal an early development and premature repression of the sexual instinct of looking and knowing."<sup>19</sup> Our search for meaning draws us close to mental illness.

Think of the scene which is the culmination of Orr's *primal* scene: Marlowe, eavesdropping on a conversation between Canino and Jones, refuses to intervene while realizing that Jones' death is the natural outcome of the scene. Once again we are with Marlowe (as he investigates we investigate) and while he is guilty of non-intervention we have also withdrawn from intervention (meaning) — and this word 'withdrawn' should be associated here with the regression of the obsessional neurotic; "... these neurotics need the help of the possibility of death chiefly in order that it may act as a solution of conflicts they have left unsolved."<sup>20</sup> Jones' death is an imagined solution (and this is enough) but it also allows the perverse text to continue: how could it be otherwise? If Jones had lived there would have ensued the transaction (payment for knowledge) and the fascination of the abyss would have been effaced. We are satisfied to the extent that the enigma is prolonged though we have opened ourselves to the possibility of guilt. This is what Orr understands as the death being crucial to the movement towards imposition of the civilized text. Here the perverse slides toward the neurotic: "Since almost all the perverse instincts of the infantile disposition can be recognized as the forces concerned in the formation of symptoms in neuroses, though in a state of repression, I was able to describe neurosis as being the 'negative' of perversion."<sup>21</sup>

### **"What follows is therefore to be regarded as no more than a provisional explanation":**

**W**e venture, then, into the text of sexuality. We probe around in the metaphor of sex which texts have been made to represent. The critical film text, of recent lineage, is notoriously bound in the discourse of psychoanalysis; hence this binds us (as egos and libidos) to sexual knots. And this knotty sexuality is *used* (the metaphor potentializes a use value for the critic) to *prove* something. The investigation is endless and many have reached their points before us: we will have to assert ourselves into the critical knowledge of the film. We will hustle for a space, we will linger for a date, we will not be satisfied with a peck on the cheek: we want it all and this *naturally* enough leads us back to consider the perverse. It is something we cannot secure. Freud clearly states: "The opposition between the instincts [for our metaphor a sense of logical order including syntagmatic narrativization] and the sexual-instincts [for us the perverse text] was transformed into one between the ego-instincts and the object-instincts, both of a libidinal nature. But in its place a new opposition appeared between the libidinal (ego- and object-) instincts and others, which must be presumed to be present in the ego and which may perhaps actually be observed in the destructive instincts."<sup>22</sup>

If the psychoanalytic film metaphor then carries forth these observations we must understand that the sexuality of the text is not bound in the characterizations so much as in the consistent battle *played-out* (in the ego-text) between life and death. And this should not be new to us for Brooks has earlier informed us that the madness of the text resides in the fore-stalling of the end. Unlike Kuhn or Walker who fixate on the sexual object in the character-text in order to situate their ideological arguments, our interest will be in retaining all the objects as suggestive of the perverse — both the homo- and the hetero-erotic instances which betray the conservatism of the ego-text. We withhold our termination in favour of abysmal choice. "Therefore, it is only in a context determined by a will to know, by an epistemic intention, by a conscious



relation to the object as an object of knowledge within a horizon of truth" that the perverse, the narrative middle, will be a disturbance.<sup>23</sup>

Walker's project is "an attempt to relate the psychoanalytical subtext to Hawks as auteur" (p. 39) by proposing that "the dark, seedy underworld of the genre allows Hawks, albeit unwittingly, to address his own unconscious" (p. 29). The task will be the construction/revelation of a relation which establishes Hawks' unconscious 'pleasuring' in the perverse-text. Specifically this is a *reading* of manifestation — a discovery (by the critic/detective/psychoanalyst) will lead to a manifesto. And the shape of this manifesto, its resonance and its mould, will be that of auteurism. The project has an end before it has a beginning — and it certainly has a history. Walker is willing that history forward and wishes at the same time to correct it. His position, he claims, is "contrary" to the auteurist critic Wood whose observation (paraphrased by Walker) was that "Hawks was not at home with Chandler, or the genre, and that the result is an unsatisfactory movie" (p. 29). Wood, in fact, states that "*The Big Sleep* is not exactly a failure, but its success exists within the severest limitations . . . Its reputation has grown out of all proportion to its achievement because of those very qualities that aroused hostility in the '40s: violence, cynicism, tough attitudes, 'black' humour are fashionable now, and so is Bogart."<sup>24</sup> So Walker's work ("my focus will primarily be on the interaction of auteur (Hawks) and genre (*film noir*)") will be the maintenance of order in a critical tradition which fails to cover all bases. While Walker is indebted to the model of "film-as-dream" in which "the 'latent content' needs to be recovered from the 'manifest content' of the diegesis" (p. 29) he seems unaware of the elementary repression which is instigating his study. There is a failure in auteurism, there is a gap in the manifesto: Walker will work to cover the gap, to deny the latently perverse.

We will set this objection to the side (we will work with it in the back of our minds), though, for Walker's tracing of the perverse text is quite thorough and worth close observation. We will come to an alternative conclusion (if conclusion must be our goal) as we will prefer displeasure to auteurist reading: our tendency is to the perverse text and all the metaphors which run rampant there. Walker claims that it is through repetition of narrative patterns that "Marlowe [gains] control over the *noir* world" (p. 31) and he links this insight to "Hawks having a knack of putting it all together in a highly organized way" (p. 30) and further "illustrating a key feature of Hawks' films: that they are complexly patterned . . . in a rich texture of correlations." (p. 30) What seems obscured here is the larger notion that the repetition of narrative elements is less the intervention of Hawks than a (fundamental) function of the textual operation. It would be here that a psychoanalytic paradigm suggests the text: "The repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction, which would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction."<sup>25</sup> For its pleasure the text repeats.

The metaphors pile-up: Marlowe repeats as Hawks repeats as the narrative repeats as the reader repeats (turn to Wood, for instance: "the film gives us *repeatedly* . . .," "Hawks' film is *more open*," "The treatment of plot in Hawks' film is *casual*," "*indifference* to plot"<sup>26</sup> [all p. 170, my italics]). There is satisfaction in the perversity of the text and the *fort-da* is only a metaphor for investigation. As above, we are all detectives, all private-eyes: we are also analysts with *text on the couch* and, going further, we are "the child [with] a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it" who inspires Freud to write on repetition compulsion. Just as we investigate/

read in the anticipation of an end we compulsively repeat in order to prolong the perversity of ambivalence. "This, then, was the complete game — disappearance and return . . . These efforts may be put down to an instinct for mastery . . ."<sup>27</sup> Freud's caveat ("No certain decision can be reached from the analysis of a single case like this") may qualify our returns but it will not inhibit us from repeating this metaphor (or from *going there*) for as Freud also tells us: "the compulsion to repeat must be ascribed to the unconscious repressed."<sup>28</sup> Further down Freud's page we are given a hint as to Walkers' compulsion to read the perverse text as a component for the mould of auteurism: "There is no doubt that the resistance of the conscious and the unconscious ego operates under the sway of the pleasure principle: it seeks to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed."

While Walker opens his reading with a prying question ("what would be the consequences for a Hawks hero of entering the *film noir* world?") he clearly does not connect his critique of symptomatic readings (Kuhn specifically) with his own critical process which is inherently flawed by the overarching concern with establishing the perverse text as part of the Hawks canon. To anticipate Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* as Hawksian is to have closed-off critical reading before the fact. The trace of Hawks and the trace of Marlowe are assumed incompatible. One is present only with the absence of the other ("The hero is still a Hawks professional doing a dangerous job . . . But the *film noir* world is also dangerous in its 'otherness' . . . (p. 31)) Where is the *contamination* but in the model that proposes itself as proven and sound? *Marlowe* was never not contaminated — he is a time and space of textual contamination. This is our point: it is irrelevant to propose a time or space (narrative, genre, auteur, characterization) which has acquired or lost an absence or a presence and to then define by such a proposition an horizon of meaning. Walker continues: ". . . *The Big Sleep* does not fit the archetypal pattern of Hawks' adventure films . . .," ". . . this inversion of a crucial Hawks feature . . .," "The other key Hawks omission . . .," "The Hawks male friendship is *thus* relocated . . ." (my italics), "Hawks preserves it as a loss . . ." Walker endorses the presence of Hawks as constitutive of meaning thus relegating all "*non-Hawksian*" elements to meaningless — *does not fit, this inversion, omission, relocation, loss* — all moments of disintegration.

"The concept of a centred structure . . . is contradictorily coherent. And as always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire. The concept of centred structure is in fact the concept of play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play."<sup>29</sup> "The force of a desire" we know in Walker's work — he has indicated clearly his auteurist predilection — but this does not relieve the pressure of the problem. We are interested in the perverse text, that middle which we return to in order to delay termination. We are interested in play: "In the case of . . . play we seemed to see that children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively."<sup>30</sup> This has implications for all our players. In reading Walker we are less convinced of Hawks' auteurism than of Walker's anxiety over the perverse text and this on account of incessant moves to repression and "coherence in contradiction."

Walker believes he has found the origin of ambivalence in *The Big Sleep* when he posits the concept of the 'Hawks



triangle' and links this to a perceived "'latent gayness' in Hawks." I will quote his theorem at length:

... the 'Hawks triangle' is a highly distinctive (sexual) triangle in which a third person, usually a woman, more rarely a younger man, comes between two men who are close friends. The triangle occurs in virtually all Hawks' adventure films ... What is most remarkable about the triangle is the number of ways Hawks develops and resolves it ... It is the evidence of these variations which leads me to speak of Hawks' ambivalence: the sense that sometimes he was committed more to the male friendship ... Although *The Big Sleep* has no 'Hawks triangle,' a similar ambivalence is at the heart of the movie. (p. 33)

We are not interested in the suggested, although highly-questionable, authorial exclusivity of the 'Hawks triangle' for this is a formula which exposes a more immediate problematic — one addressed previously. If 'ambivalence' is the ground, the basis, of definition of any 'thing', let us say, this necessitates, puts in motion, imagines, fixed ambivalence as presence. The contradiction is as blunt as that — ambivalence is co-opted in Walker's system as presence, play is denied by means of reification (materialized and abstracted imaging) and it is given the sign of 'Hawks', Hawks' Marlowe is presence by fiat of ambivalence, personality, character, confusion. This is why Walker can speak of Marlowe as a *contaminated* Hawksian hero: this contamination, loss, etc. is not absence in Walker's formula but pure presence. (It is but more of the same auteurist line which Wood pushes in his own commentary: "The ideal Marlowe from the point of view of fidelity to the original — is Dick Powell ... Incarnated by Bogart, the character achieves a sympathy and a maturity he never had in the books: placing the smart, cynical remarks as they are never placed by Chandler, making them much less than the expression of the whole man." (p. 169)) Repressing the perverse text, the notion that it is actually a challenge to play in the middle, the auteurist position is (playing with Freud) "directed towards procuring the toleration of that unpleasure by an appeal to the reality principle".<sup>11</sup> Loss is instated as presence and thus as narrative motivation. Walker sees the loss in this case as that of the male friendship crucial to the triangle: "The Hawks male friendship is thus relocated in the past [here Walker is making reference to Sean Regan who never *appears* in the film], as a loss — a loss, moreover, which structures the hero's quest. And, crucially, Hawks preserves it as a loss." (p. 32)

Having asserted this *preserved loss* Walker's critical trajectory tends to wander. Specifically, if Regan is the loss retained in order for the triangle to constitute meaning in *The Big Sleep* ("Marlowe becomes preoccupied with what happened to Regan" (p. 32)) the *logical* move would be in the direction of establishing certain characters as Regan-substitutes. This is not the point of the strategy, though, as Regan is seen to be an absent but full signifier of loss — it is not an emptied signifier awaiting exchange ("Marlowe's stepping into Regan's shoes as the General's surrogate son is *not* followed through" (p. 32)). Regan is situated as a narrative component which is nonetheless resilient to the functions of the narrative: integrated but unaffected. And this is consistent with the *reality principle* which we cited above as that strategy which is at pains to assert itself over the perverse text. (Walker's desire to fix his auteurist stance is given bald exposure in a critique of Gill Davies' comments on the film. Walker comments: "Rarely have the perils of disavowing auteurism been more clearly shown: I can think of no other director in the classical Hollywood cinema who is as indiffer-

ent, if not hostile, to the family as Hawks ... *The Big Sleep* shows Vivian being *rescued* from the family ... The ending celebrates the couple." (p.32)). Leaving aside the obvious problems of Walker's defence of *both* "Hawks' triangle" and Hawks' tendency to "celebrate the couple" we are confused by the possibility of some 'thing' being at once integral and unaffected, crucial and immutable. This contradictory proposal (at the heart of auteurism as well) revolves around Regan conceived of as an external presence (absent from action) while operating (present) as internal absence. In this sense 'Regan' and 'Hawks' come to share something — Walker's neurotic logic of mastery ("The processes involved in the formation of a neurotic phobia, which is nothing else than an attempt at flight from the satisfaction of an instinct, presents us with a model of the manner of origin of this suppositious 'instinct towards perfection' ...").<sup>12</sup> The obsession which the perverse text provokes will lure the auteurist close to madness and the neurosis of covering the gaps.

Walker relieves his anxiety by taking his analysis around the central contradiction and leaves Regan behind in order to investigate the sexuality of the text. But Regan necessarily remains as a trace: no matter how Walker will attempt to avoid discussing Regan as a loss for the remainder of the article, there is clearly a sense that, against Walker's wishes, Regan is a signifier demanding exchange. Incomplete as either a presence or absence the signifier will operate as a mark against which all others will reverberate. (Remember Saussure's most rudimentary claim: "Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position."<sup>13</sup>) Marlowe is exchangeable with Regan but neither equals/eradicates the value of the other: the perverse is the field of choice, open exchange. Walker cannot allow this exchange (for fear of undermining Hawks' "celebration of the couple") and thus moves to obscure his intentions in the guise of psychoanalytic critique. This is effected through the shift into explicit analysis of sexuality in the text: "If, on the surface, *The Big Sleep* poses the question of how a Hawks hero would cope in the *noir* world, in the subtext it answers by characterizing the world as one of fascination, which takes the hero on a complex journey through variations of sexual desire." (p. 33) (Regan's disavowal is never complete, though, and Walker eventually — but ineffectively — does manoeuvre the sign into an exchange: ie. Vivian/Bacall as Regan, in drag.)

The sexual 'variations' are brought into *play*, instigated, seduced (both Walker and Kuhn agree) through a specific site — Geiger's house. This becomes, for both critics, "the site of obsessive return" and hence the point of a primal trauma which will be understood as fuelling the narrative. Where Walker had earlier suggested an originary moment *outside* the text (ie. the loss of Regan) which ultimately anticipated a logical contradiction in the auteurist critical text the solution has been to pick another originary moment which will have to be brought in line with the 'Hawks' text. In fact, to suggest that a textually-bound moment now precipitates the film-work is to necessarily restrict the success of the auteurist analysis: the sign 'Hawks' is thrown into exchange and away from exclusivity. The perversity of the text is not irreducible without exposing that neurosis which we have 'seen' Freud tracking in his paper on pleasure. Having chosen a moment "in the *noir* world" (here is the problem explicitly — the binarism of inside/outside<sup>14</sup>) Walker will proceed to develop the only 'Hawks' strand which remains: the auteur's "latent gayness." This argument takes as its departure the Kuhn analysis and we will leave Walker at this point as a trail to be read in anticipation of its return ...





Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall — publicity still for *The Big Sleep*

### "But let us pause for a moment and reflect"

Kuhn's analysis intervenes much as we intervened: "A text is obviously instrumental in producing its own meanings, but meaning nonetheless always exceeds the limits of any one text: readings are always informed by various contexts and interests." (1984, p. 74)<sup>15</sup> This sets up the desire to read not only the film but the surrounding culture: "a recipe for combining textual analysis with a certain sort of contextual investigation." Hence, "the specific conditions of production of the film will assume increasing importance as the work progresses" (1981, p. 5): "the essay attempts a broadening of methodological perspective. Though in another sense, too, in concentrating on certain features of the industrial context of production of one particular film, its focus is relatively specific." (1985, p. 74) "In attempting to come to terms with questions of context whilst holding at the same time to a model of film text as productive of meaning in its own right, the arguments advanced here are directed towards constructing a method for dealing in tandem with film texts and their social, historical and industrial contexts." (*ibid.*) This is a tall order but not without a history of its own and a list of adherents.<sup>16</sup> But it is a view of the world as split between meanings inside and out. The "con" and the "inter" of the texts only support a system of entities known as *themselves*, "... productive of meanings in [their] own right" as Kuhn sees it. "Inter" as that which expresses "mutual or reciprocal action or relation" (OED) and "con" as that which means "with," "together," "jointly," "altogether" ... (OED), despite their good intentions, obscure the fact that the *trace* is e/affected already — the emptying of the categories of meaning is antecedent to their definition as constituting-entities which can be *conned* into relations.

Broadening and specification, Kuhn's antinomies, are in

operation prior to the critical task: that is the reason Kuhn can posit the text as specific site of investigation within the 'broad' site of society. Her taxonomic work is completed by the operation of the text: the text is socialized and the social is textualized already.<sup>17</sup> But we will leave this as a cited problem and proceed along the line of Kuhn's investigation. "The initial motivation for this project, then, was a combination of a pedagogical imperative and a desire to penetrate the mystery that is *The Big Sleep*." (1985, p. 75) While the hermeneutic project is placed in a secondary position in this excerpt the primacy of the pedagogical motive opens itself to contradiction. We have introduced one aspect of this problem but assuming a different track of investigation we notice that the earlier essay did not, in fact, posit this primacy or for that matter the notion of a pedagogical challenge whatsoever: "My overall project was precipitated largely by the fact that the frequently remarked "confusing" quality of the film's narrative offered a challenge of a very simple kind — to unravel what "actually" goes on in the film." (1981, p. 5) The pedagogical primacy is not addressed in the early essay and it becomes clear that Kuhn's move is in part an attempt to claim a primacy of reading status for her work based upon an investigatory 'use-value': "In broaching the relationship between text and context without assuming either that the one is always an effect of the other, or that they operate entirely independently of each other, this chapter offers itself as a contribution towards the development of a particular kind of theoretically-informed film history." (1985, p. 76)

Kuhn and Walker are both staking ground: their value will be measured by their pedagogical-inclusivity in terms of film history on the one hand and auteurism on the other. It is not surprising, then, that their approaches and points of analysis are crucially similar: the use of Geiger's house as the analogical "site of obsessive return." The sexuality which they will associate with this site is then interpreted in a unilinear



fashion functioning as justification for homo- or heter-erotic determinacy (this antagonism indicated by Walker's "Here I would see things rather differently").

It is about time that the "site of obsessive return" become the focus of *our* obsessive return. We will assume it as the source of our displeasure and, by analogy, our neurosis and this return will only be one more attempt and one of many attempts at *mastery* over the perverse text. (By analogy, we are — as has been worked-out above — the detective, the investigator, the anthropologist, the child, the analyst — the child-analyst — and the neurotic just as much as Marlowe is consistently all of these at the same time.) Kuhn leads us to the site by introduction of the term 'censorship' and by this route she points to the censorship pursued by the Hollywood Production Code (her context) and censorship as developed in psychoanalytic theory: "Freud used the term censorship to refer to the operation whereby unconscious thoughts which may not, for whatever reason, be directly admitted to the consciousness are subject to distortion in the production of the analysand's observable discourse or symptoms." (p. 87) We are on the look-out for points of insertion of this analogy, states Kuhn, and we come to find it (as soon as "the 'confusion' of *The Big Sleep* melts away on inspection of its narrative" (p. 88) in the *mise-en-scène* and in particular at the scene of obsessive return: Geiger's house. (We should recall for the moment that Orr's take on this situation — his attempt at *mastery* — resulted in his citing of the "scene in the alley" as that rupture in need of investigation.)

Kuhn states: "Geiger's house, cut off from the daylight world of the familiar, is the classic 'other scene' — the site exactly of mystery and enigma. It is shadowy, closed-in, cluttered and messy — the *mise-en-scène* of the Unconscious, of Freud's Uncanny, at once both familiar and alien, reassuring and threatening." (p. 91) The linkage of censorship to the Uncanny is justified thus: "The Production Code . . . [was] directed predominantly at narrative themes and dialogue, though, leaving visual cinematic codes as a site onto which prohibited representations could at times, consciously or otherwise, be displaced" (p. 94) and "the *mise-en-scène* of Geiger's house figures in the film as a discourse across which may be read a series of displaced and condensed representations of an underlying and unexpressed perversity or menace in the area of sexuality." (p. 95)

Kuhn's operation (and Walker borrows this), based on a reading of censorship, is a matrix, a *playground* appropriately, where pleasure is detained — the child, in fascination with the uncanny, repeatedly risks neurosis.<sup>18</sup> Having facilitated a relation between censorship, its rupture, and the uncanny, Kuhn attempts to define the nature of the uncanny and it is with this move that Walker chooses to part company. "Geiger's house is the object of a scrutinizing gaze . . . [it] offers itself as a puzzle demanding to be solved . . . The puzzle is none other than the riddle of the feminine." (p. 91) Walker objects in order to assert that the "site of obsessive return" is "recast as the 'site of desire'" (p. 33) and this desire anchors a reading which works to substantiate a claim for auteurism by reference to Hawks' "latent gayness." If Walker *can* make use of Kuhn's analysis it will not be through any sort of recasting for this, in effect, only serves to collapse the matrix which is theorized by Kuhn. Having followed this far Walker must continue, asserting that the house was indeed the "riddle of the feminine" and claim, alongside Kuhn, that "the trouble, the disturbance, at the heart of *The Big Sleep* in its symptomatic articulation of the threat posed to the law of patriarchy by the feminine." (p. 95) And at this point Walker could then attempt to construct a specific link

between the homo-erotic and the feminine (something which Kuhn suggests, in fact: "Not only is this the site of Geiger's murder and of various other activities transgressive of institutional law, its *mise-en-scène* also constitutes a symptomatic representation of sexualities which, transgressing the law of patriarchy, are not consciously speakable in the text." (p. 94)

Walker's contradiction evolves from a repression, a disavowal of his reading's incompatibility with the theoretical move which Kuhn makes in construction of the analogy identifying Geiger's house as an "object of the scrutinizing gaze". Inherited from Mulvey, this theoretical position asserts as its core observation that: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure . . ." (39) The collision which the trajectory of Walker's auteurism and Mulvey's Lacanian/Althusserian criticism anticipates forces Walker to shift his attention from the male gaze which controls the woman's body to an auteur's desire for homo-erotic adventure. Walker's attempt at this involves 1) claims that "subjective tracking shots are most unusual in Hawks . . . which serves to draw attention to what is being visualized here, which is a middle-aged man cruising to pick up a young man, a young man who, within the film's subtext at least, is coded as gay." (p. 33) and 2) that the "site of desire" which Walker asserts in place of the "site of obsessive return" be hinged to an object lost by the protagonist. Unfortunately, Walker cannot find an object of originary loss for Marlowe and thus cannot substantiate a "site of desire".

Kuhn's assertion that Geiger's house becomes the "object of a scrutinizing gaze" contradicts — in her application of psychoanalytic theory — the fact that it is "like the classic 'scene of the crime' . . . a site of obsessive return". The feminization of the space, the designation as such, contradicts the earlier-cited perversity of the space: the detective, the neurotic (as we have described him) as fetishist (this being the character central to scopophilia and the 'scrutinizing gaze') refuses 'scotomization' in favour of ambivalence towards the object and, further, anticipation of the *play* of objects ("In one of my two cases this split had formed the basis of a moderately severe obsessional neurosis."<sup>40</sup>) Further, the site of obsessive return is that of the anaclitic method of object retrieval while that of the scopophilic gaze is associated with narcissism: the uncanny is, indeed, related to narcissism, but lines-up in contradiction to the anaclitic.<sup>41</sup> So, while Geiger's house "may be regarded as [the] displaced and condensed representation of the perverse or degenerate forms of sexuality and the consequent fragmentation of the family" (p. 89) and come to be seen as a site of the uncanny it is imperative that we retain that site, by definition (from "The Uncanny"), as the effect "produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes . . . The infantile element in this, which also dominates the minds of neurotics, is the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality . . ." (p. 367). And here we can lay out the problems: for the neurotic the uncanny is an over-abundance of the imaginary while fetishism is the balancing of the imagined and the real — the disavowal. While Kuhn may construct a *mastering* project it is conceivable only by positing one *or* the other of the scenarios (Geiger's house as site of return *or* object of the gaze) and not both. (As noted above, this 'problem' and 'lie' is that which Derrida terms "coherence in contradiction" which is necessarily attended by a "force of desire": for



Walker we found the *force* to be *autourism* while for Kuhn it is *Mulveyian*.

**"It follows from what has been said . . .":**

Kuhn claims that the common discourse which asserts *The Big Sleep's* narrative incoherence is an outcome of a "rhetoric of confusion" operational within the text. It is proposed that this rhetoric may be "regarded as an expression of unconscious textual processes, and analysed by treating the film text as analogous to the discourse of an analyst" (p. 87). We have followed the investigation/analysis to a point of theoretical contradiction — all by way of saying that the perverse text, by definition riddled with contradiction, has resisted Kuhn's psychoanalytic investigation as coherence (the filmy-text, that remnant, will not be *ironed out*). This is not to claim that the narrative is *not* readable psychoanalytically, or even as coherent, but it must be maintained (along with our claim that there is no limit to the text — our text included) "that there are any number of *other* ways to tell what the two people in the analytic situation are doing. Each of these ways either cultivates and accentuates or neglects and minimizes certain potential features of the analysis; none is exact and comprehensive in every way" (my emphasis).<sup>42</sup> Here Schafer suggests a 'conclusion' to our analysis which, of course, is nothing but an alternative — a turning-point — for renewed investigation.

For Schafer, Freud offers two narrative strategies:

One of his primary narrative structures begins with the infant and young child as a beast, otherwise known as the id, and ends with the beast domesticated, tamed by frustration in the course of development in a civilization hostile to its nature. . . . The basic story is ancient. . . .

Freud's other primary narrative structure is based upon Newtonian physics as transmitted through the physiological and neuroanatomical laboratories of the nineteenth century. This account presents psychoanalysis as the study of the mind viewed as a machine — in Freud's words, as mental apparatus. This machine is characterized by inertia; it does not work unless it is moved by force. (pp. 30-3)

In our analysis we have found that Orr, for instance, subscribes to the first of these structures wherein his citing of a trauma ("the scene in the alley") is the location where the 'beast' exposes the repression of the narrative. Brooks, on the other hand, in his interpretation of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" assumes the second narrative structure, that of the 'machine'. What we find in Kuhn (and Walker because he follows Kuhn's moves) is an attempt to superimpose these structures. The theoretical contradictions which we discovered arise from the structural incompatibility of 1) the positing of censorship as determining the test (this formulated upon the notion that the 'beast' is repressed by the narrative) and 2) the positing of the "riddle of the feminine" (wherein Kuhn asserts the "scrutinizing gaze" and Walker reads a "latent gayness" into Hawks' cinematographic style) which invests in the 'machine' structure inasmuch as the initially-inert narrative/hero is motivated by "disturbance" (Kuhn) and "loss" (Walker).<sup>43</sup>

While there are other narrative structures to be read in psychoanalysis it is striking that both Kuhn and Walker, in providing "a contribution towards the development of a particular kind of theoretically-informed film history" (Kuhn, p. 76) and an "attempt to relate the psychoanalytical subtext to Hawks as auteur" (Walker, p. 39) operate within the scope of Schafer's two proposed narratives. The radical critique

assumed by either is thoroughly circumscribed by structures conceived by the tradition which they challenge as conservative: there is no realization of the *insideness* of their declared *outsideness*. Schafer clearly states the range of the problem: "That Freud's beast and machine are indeed narrative structures and not dictated by the data is shown by the fact that other psychoanalysts have developed their own accounts, each with a more or less different beginning, course, and ending." (p. 33) To use Freud is to engage with the history of the discourse; to rearrange the structures of that history, to negate some traces and amplify others, is to establish the interpretation as some form of 'truth' antecedent to its own functioning. Thus, there is constructed the transcendent truths of "the scrutinizing gaze" and "latent gayness" which precede their interpretation in texts determined by their presence. In this way, the use of Freud is not contingent upon assuming his categories: "Transcendental means transcategorical."<sup>44</sup>

Assuming Freud's narrative categories we will ask, along with Schafer, this fundamental question: "What does it mean to say 'along psychoanalytic lines'?" (p. 39) And, again with Schafer, we will respond: "The analyst slowly and patiently develops an emphasis on infantile or archaic modes of sexual and aggressive action." (my emphasis) "The Freudian analyst also progressively organizes this retelling around bodily zones, modes, and substances, particularly the mouth, the anus, and genitalia . . . All these constituents are given roles in the infantile drama of family life, a drama that is organized around births, losses, illnesses, abuse and neglect, the parents' real and imagined conflicts and sexuality . . ." (p. 34) Following the thread of this theoretical approach we point to two fundamental constituents ignored or repressed by the analysts Kuhn and Walker: 1) the text-absent mother whose trace will be necessary in the Freudian reading and 2) the acceptance of Marlowe as infant — this mode of inquiry is suggested with Carmen's opening line to Marlowe ("You're not very tall, are you?") and substantiated by his progression through obsessive neurosis to heterosexual *normalcy*. On this matter Freud states: "We have become aware that the psychical functions concerned — above all, the sexual functions, but various important ego-functions too — have to undergo a long and complicated development before reaching the state characteristic of the normal adult. We can assume that these developments are not always so smoothly carried out that the total function passes through this regular progressive modification. Wherever a portion of it clings to a previous stage, what is known as a 'point of fixation' results . . ." <sup>45</sup> We would be inclined, in this analysis, to read Geiger's house (for Kuhn and Walker "the site of obsessive return") as the "point of fixation." We would re-orient Kuhn and Walker away from the "other scene" and a theorization of *clues* culled to "unravel the mysteries" of the uncanny towards an analysis consistent to its history and discourse. In this manner we challenge the theorists to provide a theoretical and pedagogical consistency. We hesitate to construct self-fulfilling analytical models which assume the presence and truth-order of a heritage which is nonetheless made absent through translation — an absence disavowed. Schafer makes our point: "The claim that these normative life historical projects are simply fact-finding expeditions is . . . highly problematic. At the very outset, each such expedition is prepared for what is to be found: it has its maps and compasses, its conceptual supplies, and its probable destination." (p. 52) In this manner we critique Kuhn's use of the "scrutinizing gaze" and Walker's use of "latent gayness" as dissimulated paradigms offering mastery of the perverse.



## Notes

1. R. Barthes, "Upon Leaving the Movie Theatre" trans. B. Augst & S. White in *Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings* ed. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (New York: Tanam Press, 1980), p. 3.
2. S. Eisenstein, "Through Theatre to Cinema" trans. J. Leyda in *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), pp. 3-4.
3. Again a reference to the Russian formalists as "we" borrow and mime their "we" (and their weaved rags, their wee rags) for the reminder and remainder of a discursive tradition which the first person 'plural' sets-in-motion in dreaming a film pedagogy. Vertov, for instance: "We call ourselves *kinoks* — as opposed to 'cinematographers,' a herd of junkmen doing rather well peddling their rags." (from "WE: A Variant of Manifesto," *Kino-Eye: Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 5.) And here is Brik, as a representative of *New Lef*: "Eisenstein does not see cinema as a means of representing reality, he lays claim to philosophical cinema-tracts. We would suggest that this is a mistake. . . . From our point of view. . . . Our only regret is. . . ." (O. Brik, "The Lef Arena," trans. Diana Matias in *Movies and Methods* ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 19-20.)
4. Cf. Gregory L. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). "The postmodernizing of pedagogy is based upon the recognition that knowledge in and of the humanities is precisely a knowledge of enframing, of media and *mise-en-scene* understood not as a representation of something else but as itself a mode of action in the cultural world. The conclusion to be drawn from this recognition could be summarized by the axiom that has transformed the natural and human sciences as well — the observer participates in the observation; the organization and classification of knowledge are *interested* activities." (pp. 183-4)
5. For instance, R. Wood in *Howard Hawks* (rev. ed.) (London: BFI, 1981), pp. 168-70; J. Mayne, "The Limits of Spectacle," *Wide Angle* Vol. 6 no. 3 (1984), pp. 4-15; R. Bellour, "The Obvious and The Code," *Screen* 15 (1974), pp. 7-17; C. Orr, "The Trouble with Harry: On the Hawks Version of *The Big Sleep*," *Wide Angle* Vol. 5 no. 2 (1983), pp. 66-71.
6. M. Walker, "Hawks and Film Noir: *The Big Sleep*," *CineACTION!* no. 12/13, August 1988, pp. 29-39; A. Kuhn, "The Big Sleep: Disturbance in the Sphere of Sexuality," *Wide Angle* Vol. 4 no. 3, 1981, pp. 4-11; as well a revised version of this essay entitled "The Big Sleep: censorship, film text and sexuality" in *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1985), pp. 74-95.  
These works are integrally involved with film and pedagogy — the institutionalization of the perverse text — as they are acknowledged as the fruit of seminars devoted specifically to *The Big Sleep*. Is it too much imagination that links these disseminations, these seminars, these seemingly repressed desires for, and designs on, the same? Text education and sex education are not unrelated: we feel them under the covers (we discover them) playing each semester in the same, the seminary and the seminar. All this is not frivolous but, of course(s), seminal.
7. R. Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," *Critical Inquiry* 7 no. 1 (Autumn, 1980), p. 38.
8. M. Serres, *Hermes II. L'interférence* (Paris, 1972), p. 65 (as translated and quoted in Ulmer, p. 163).
9. P. Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," *Yale French Studies* nos. 55-6 (1977), p. 283.
10. Brooks, p. 286.
11. S. Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (1915) trans. J. Strachey in *The Penguin Freud Library* (PFL), (Markham: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985), 12, p. 77.
12. Bellour, pp. 14-6.
13. Freud, "Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness" (1908), PFL, 12, p. 42.
14. Kuhn (1985), p. 88.
15. Freud, p. 54.
16. Freud, "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis" (1909), PFL, 9, pp. 123-4.
17. Brooks, p. 292.
18. Orr, p. 66.
19. Freud, p. 124.
20. Freud, p. 116.
21. Freud, "My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of the Neuroses" (1906), PFL, 10, p. 79.
22. Freud, "Beyond The Pleasure Principle" (1920), PFL, 11, p. 335n.
23. J. Derrida, "Signature Event Context" trans. Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 320.
24. Wood, p. 168.
25. Freud, p. 315.
26. Cf. Freud, pp. 276-7. Here Freud refers to Fechner's views on pleasure as a "psycho-physical relation to conditions of stability and instability" which suggests that "while between the two limits, which may be described as qualitative thresholds of pleasure and unpleasure, there is a certain margin of aesthetic indifference. . . ." Can we surmise that the perverse text is a sight of indifference?
27. Freud, p. 284.
28. Freud, p. 290.
29. J. Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" trans. Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 279.
30. Freud, p. 307.
31. Freud, p. 290.
32. Freud, p. 315.
33. F. de Saussure, *Course In General Linguistics* ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye & trans. W. Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 118.
34. J. Derrida, "Linguistics and Grammatology" trans. G.C. Spivak in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).  
To think play radically the ontological and transcendental problematics must first be seriously exhausted. It is therefore the game of the world that must be first thought, before attempting to understand all the forms of play in the world. (p. 50)  
The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. What amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. (p. 65)
35. While I will draw primarily from Kuhn's thesis as developed in *The Power of the Image*, reference to the earlier essay will also be made. Differentiation will be by date.
36. Cf. Bakhtin, deLauretis, Mukarovsky, Volosinov, Kristeva, Jameson.
37. Cf. P. Pavis, "Production, Reception, and the Social Context" in *On Referring In Literature* ed. A. Whiteside and M. Issacharoff, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 135. "It is, however, the task of unveiling forms behind forms. . . . that we must now pursue in two directions: the textualization of ideology and the ideologization of the text."
38. Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" (1919) PFL, 14, p. 360.  
For it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts — a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, leading to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the impulses of small children; a compulsion, too, which is responsible for a part of the course taken by the analyses of neurotic patients. All these considerations prepare us for the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner 'compulsion to repeat' is perceived as uncanny.
39. L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Movies and Methods II* ed. B. Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 309.
40. Freud, "Fetishism" (1927), PFL, 7 pp. 351-7.
41. Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905), PFL, 7, p. 145n.
42. Schafer, p. 37.
43. Walker, p. 39n. "Annette Kuhn's psychoanalytic reading begins from a similar premise to my own and adopts a similar methodology, but arrives at a rather different conclusion." (my italics)
44. Derrida (1982), "The Supplement of Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics," p. 195.
45. Freud, "The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis," PFL, 10, p. 135.





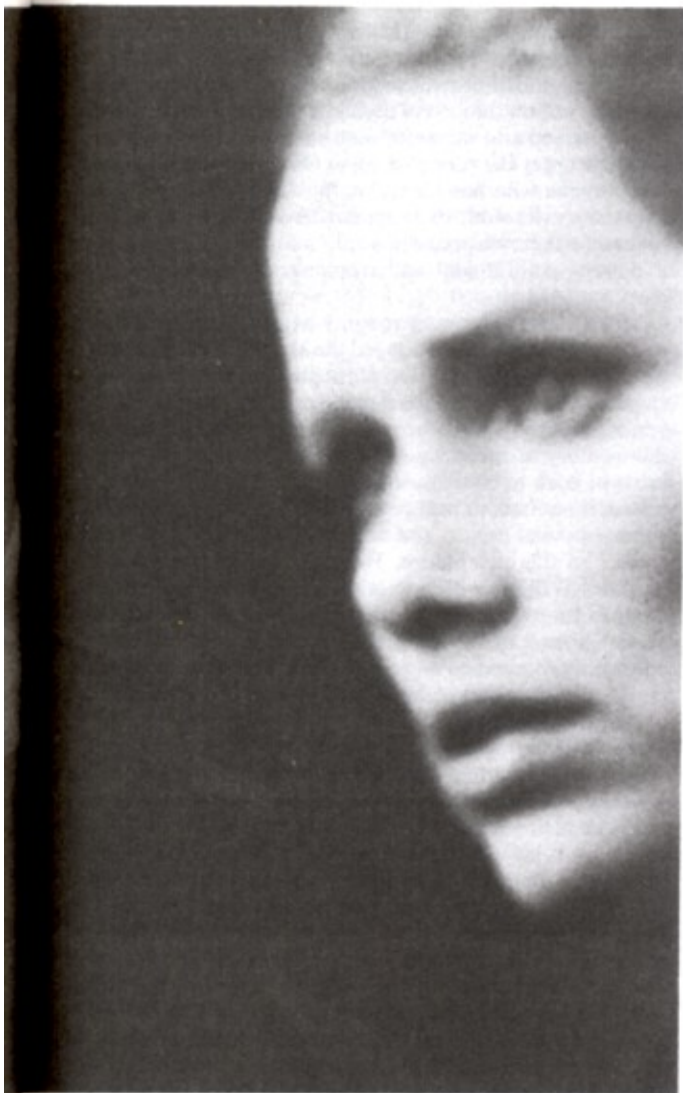
Bergman's irreparably damaged adults: Ingrid Thulin and Liv Ullmann in *Cries and Whispers*.

# Theory

## vs

# Experience





'Pray for us now and at the hour of our birth'  
— T.S. Eliot, *Animula*

**A**lice Miller has published three books on psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, of which the most completely satisfying seems to me the middle one, *For Your Own Good: Hidden cruelty in child-rearing and the roots of violence*, published in German in 1980 and available in what appears to be an admirable translation by Hildegard and Hunter Hannum (Farrar Straus Giroux, New York). That is not to say that the other two are unsuccessful or unimportant: ideally, all three should be read in chronological order. But the earlier (*Drama of the Gifted Child*) was addressed primarily and explicitly to Miller's fellow-analysts and is limited by this fact; and the later (*Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*), while it contains marvellous things and is perhaps ultimately the most important of the three, is marred by a pervasive sense of being written by someone who knows she has said something of urgent importance and has not been sufficiently attended to — there is much unnecessary repetition of ideas and the style is at times over-insistent and hectoring. (This is a common and understandable response to being ignored when one is convinced of the urgency of what one is saying, but it remains nonetheless

# ALICE MILLER AND THE STATUS OF CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

---

by Robin Wood

a pity). The three books already constitute a powerful and challenging body of work of the most direct social relevance imaginable. There is now a fourth: a selection of Miller's striking water-colours, product of the creativity released by the experience of writing the three previous books, with a valuable introduction (*Pictures of a Childhood*).

I may be wrong in believing that Miller has been largely ignored within her field — or at least that her work has not had the impact and recognition it deserves. She is by no means unread, but both of the people who drew my attention to her work are laymen. I am not intimate with the world of contemporary psychoanalytic theory beyond its appropriation by contemporary film theory, which has obviously been highly selective. But, within all the Freudian/Lacanian film theory with which I have struggled (including its feminist branch) I cannot recall a single reference to her, and the silence seems eloquent and all too familiar. If she *has* been ignored within her field, it is clearly because — however much truth, force and potency there may be in her writings — she is so damned inconvenient. If she is correct, then the whole structure of psychoanalytic theory as elaborated in the area of film studies resoundingly collapses. And what becomes then of all those learned esoteric, mutually supportive papers, yawned through at film studies conferences and



subsequently published in academic journals, whose ultimate destiny and *raison d'être* is to fatten their authors' *curricula vitae*, on which careers are built?

(I should add here in fairness and honesty that if Miller is correct — and it is the purpose of the present article to consider this hair-raising possibility — then significant portions of my own work are equally in jeopardy.)

I want to discuss, first, the doubts Miller's work raises about the Freudian tradition, and then the doubts I have about Miller's ability to provide an effective alternative to it (as opposed to a dramatic and stimulating intervention, of which there can be not the slightest doubt whatever). I shall be talking only intermittently and incidentally about films, but I want to raise fundamental issues about the practice of most contemporary film theory and if possible put an end to the Lacanian hegemony.

\*\*\*

It seems necessary to begin by offering some account of what Miller says and, particularly, of where and why she deviates from Freud. I hope this will not be taken as an adequate substitute for reading her at first hand. Summaries are notoriously biased, selective and potentially misleading; if they manage to convey accurately the gist of the original (which is rare), they fail to convey its tone, a crucial component of meaning. I cannot reproduce here the passion and commitment of Alice Miller's writings: any passion and commitment would be my own, in response to Miller's books. I shall just say that *For Your Own Good* is the most enthralling and devastating new work of literature I have read in the past decade.

We may start, then, from Miller's relationship to Freud: not entirely simple (i.e. outright rejection), but not particularly complex (one might argue, not complex enough). The first edition of *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* was dedicated to his memory on the 125th anniversary of his birth, and Miller consistently acknowledges that without Freud her own work would not exist or be possible. On the other hand, the boundary between what she accepts and what she rejects is extremely precise and clear, and it occurs very early in Freud's career, marked by the year 1897. What she accepts is Freud's discovery of the unconscious and the subsequent revelations that swiftly followed from this in his early psychoanalytic practice, centred upon what has become known as the 'seduction theory.' Miller sees the term as itself a significantly misleading and perverse euphemism authorized — in every sense of the word — by patriarchy, and would clearly prefer a term such as 'child abuse theory.' The term she actually opts for is 'trauma theory.' She explains: "The seduction theory of 1896 as a whole maintains that *all* neuroses are a consequence of sexual abuse before the age of seven; this certainly cannot be true since there are without any doubt non-sexual traumas as well. I want to make it particularly clear that I do not give credence to the seduction theory of 1896 in its entirety but only to its underlying premise: recognition of the significance of trauma and of its societal repression as the source of neurosis." (*Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, p. 41, footnote). Her debt to Freud is above all, perhaps, encapsulated in this: "We owe the fundamental recognition of the significance of early childhood for all of later life to Sigmund Freud." (*Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, p. 5).

What Miller rejects is the 'drive theory' that replaced that 'seduction theory' from 1897 on, and everything that followed from it. 'Everything that followed from it' in fact constitutes the main body of Freudian theory as it has come down to us: the Oedipus complex, the theory of infantile

sexuality, and, implicitly (Miller nowhere so far spells this out), the theory of constitutional bisexuality. Also, by implication, this constitutes a rejection of Freudian dream theory, since the notion that every dream is the disguised expression of a repressed and shameful wish clearly derives from and is founded upon the 'drive' theory. One can well understand why anyone who has based her/his life's work upon Freudian theory (let alone its Lacanian derivative) would not wish to read further: when one has built a career on a closed mind it is very painful and embarrassing to have suddenly to reopen it.

Miller's argument runs roughly as follows: Freud's early research and practice produced the shocking revelation that an extraordinary proportion of his patients had at some early stage in their lives been sexually molested and abused by adults, usually parents or near relatives, and had repressed the memory of these traumatic events, which could only be brought back to consciousness during analysis. He felt compelled, for a time, to believe these revelations as the record of actual physical events, and according to Miller he was quite correct in this acceptance. However, Freud was himself a patriarchal figure with a strong idealization of and commitment to his own father and a strong investment in the ideological norms of his culture — norms which his research constantly threatened — and he couldn't reconcile this with the implication that a significantly large proportion of his culture's respected and respectable figures were sexually abusing their own or other people's children. His reaction was to develop an increasing incredulity that culminated in his rejection of the possibility that the 'remembered' events could be real: a rejection based upon little but his own disinclination to believe the facts that were before him. Still, the 'memories' had to be explained somehow: if they weren't real, then they must have been fantasies, and fantasies so powerful and intense as to be mistaken, in recollection, for reality. This at once morally exonerates the adults who, while of course not perfect, are innocent of the grosser crimes of sexual exploitation, and shifts the guilt to the children, locating the 'immorality' in their desires: they fantasized that their parents had raped and molested them because that was what they secretly wanted, they had projected their own desires on to the innocent adults. This is the basis of Freud's 'drive' theory, the belief in infantile sexuality, and the Oedipus complex (the child's sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex, not the parent's for the child). According to Miller, this whole elaborate edifice rests upon no firmer foundation than Freud's own bias. She concedes of course (indeed, it is the central thrust of her work) that children want and need their parents' love, tenderness, respect and understanding, and above all need to be listened to and taken seriously; but it would be somewhat absurd — both superfluous and misleading — to theorize that need in Freud's terms.

Miller, then, accepts Freud's account of the existence of the unconscious and of repression; where she departs from him is in her account of the *content* of the unconscious — of what, precisely, is repressed. For Freud, this is the drives of the Id, 'disgraceful' desires rooted in an infantile sexuality assumed to be innate. For Miller, it is childhood trauma brought about by abuse (both sexual and other) by adults. The memories must be repressed not only because they are inherently disturbing, but because the parents (especially) and related adults (as parental adjuncts or surrogates) are represented, both by themselves and the culture generally, as good and beyond reproach, the very founts of morality ('Honour thy father and thy mother,' the fourth command-



ment). The child is forced (partly for want of any other available attitudes) to internalize this idealized representation. Hence not only the memory of the appalling wrongs the parents and parent-surrogates have perpetrated, but the child's instinctive and natural responses of rage and hatred, must be repressed, rendered unconscious. If I suggest that the latter explanation now seems (as it couldn't to Freud) infinitely the more plausible, I shall doubtless be accused of enslavement by that 'common sense' reputed to be a cornerstone of bourgeois ideology. The plausibility, though, is made possible by the fact that it has recently become almost impossible to open a daily newspaper without being confronted by well-authenticated reports of child abuse (often, but by no means exclusively, sexual): in Freud's day, a tabu topic. There seems no reason to suppose that child abuse is more prevalent now than it was in the time of Freud: it may even have become *less* prevalent, partly because it is being exposed, partly because family structures have become somewhat less claustrophobic, insulated and introverted. It is simply that the dirtiest of all dirty secrets is at last being subjected to public scrutiny.

Miller's work, then, has behind it a very different cultural situation from that behind Freud's, enabling quite different perceptions and deductions. Surely we now find the notion that small children would like to be raped or molested by their parents incomparably more fantastic (and perverse) than the notion that many children are used by adults as sexual objects. (The notion that little boys literally wish to fuck their mothers seems no less fantastic). Miller's strength is that she not only sees this clearly but extends it to other forms of child-abuse that are even more prevalent (corporal punishment, psychic manipulation and domination, neglect and contempt) or virtually all-pervasive in our methods of child-rearing (summed up in her magnificent phrase 'poisonous pedagogy' — by which, it becomes clear, she means *all* forms of pedagogy, our educational system from top to bottom, both within and outside the family).

I shall return later to my lingering doubts, uncertainties and disagreements on the subject of infantile sexuality and especially, constitutional bisexuality: I am not at all sure that Miller is not throwing out the Freudian baby (to which he could never in fact quite give birth) with the Freudian bathwater. First, however, I want to make clear the grounds on which I welcome her intervention, and why I have found her work so impressive and stimulating.

\*\*\*

First — and, as one who has always defined himself as a film critic rather than a film theorist, I find this particularly refreshing in an age so theory-dominated, an age in which abstract ideas invariably are given precedence over direct, lived experience even to the point of seeming to invalidate its perceptions — there is Miller's assault on theory in general: more precisely, on the way in which theory (unproven and often unprovable) becomes dogma. Her apt term is 'the Procrustean bed of theories.' Procrustes was a mythical tyrant who expressed his tyranny by forcing all his victims to fit exactly onto a bed; those who were too short were stretched on the rack until they were long enough, those who were too tall had their feet cut off. This describes very vividly what Miller thinks many analysts do to their patients and what I think many contemporary film theorists do to movies. When Miller writes:

... Although I personally owe the first steps of my liberation to psychoanalysis, I see its alienating vocabulary and

its dogmas as factors that impede further development in theory and practice (*Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, p. 6)

— She might be putting into words my own feelings about the current state of film theory.

Just before this she has said, à propos of Freud's recognition that 'childhood shapes an individual's later life':

The form such shaping takes is culturally determined and subject to the vicissitudes of society; it must be explored anew by every generation and be understood within the particular context of each individual life. Any attempt to define this form for all time — for example, with the aid of the Oedipus complex or drive theory — exposes psychoanalysis to the danger of self-mutilation. For how can its methods be applied creatively when the questions raised about patterns of child development in a given generation have already been answered once and for all by the Oedipus complex? If, instead of interrupting new material in its uniqueness, analysts are taught during their training to regard it not as something new but as corroboration of theories that claim to be eternal, they will learn to ignore the far-reaching potentialities psychoanalysis has for bringing the truth to light before they even perceive what these potentialities are.

— What a magnificent description of much contemporary writing on film (especially Hollywood film), in which the film is coldly dissected, like a specimen on an operating table, not as a means of *testing* the theory, but as a means of demonstrating (yet again) its correctness and validity. I have seen, in my time, so many complex and highly specific Hollywood movies stretched or mutilated to fit into the 'Procrustean bed' of theory. One might take, as an obvious and familiar example, the 'Procrustean bed' into which Laura Mulvey forced the films of Hawks, Hitchcock and Sternberg in her regrettably still influential article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. The article, in itself quite probing and tentative, a potentially useful starting-point for exploration, has become central to contemporary dogma: students have only to quote a sentence or two of Mulvey on the Sternberg/Dietrich films, and no more need be said, the films (perhaps still the most radical and comprehensive analysis in commercial cinema of women's oppression and resistance outside '30s/'40s *Mizoguchi*) have been labelled for all time and any further investigation (even, one guesses at times, the burden of actually watching them) would be superfluous.

Something needs to be said here, however, about the words 'dogma' and 'dogmatic.' My own work has often been accused of being 'dogmatic.' I think there is a distinction. 'Dogmatic' has acquired a popular sense — something like 'the strong, forceful expression of personal conviction' — which partly detaches it from its origin (and to which I am happy to plead guilty). 'Dogma,' as I understand the term, has very little to do with personal conviction (rather the opposite), but refers to a body of ideas and beliefs handed down as established truth: Lacan's 'mirror phase,' 'Imaginary' and 'Symbolic' constitute an obvious example of contemporary dogma, the terms never questioned, employed as if their meaning and validity were as certain as the turning of the earth, and immense structures (of verbiage, if nothing else) raised upon them without any doubts being entertained as to the solidity of the foundations. It would be rash of me to assert that my own work — frequently, I agree, 'dogmatic' — is entirely free of 'dogma' in this sense. But the use I have made of Freud seems to me rather different from the widespread appropriation of Lacan: like Miller, I have taken from Freud what I find useful to my own work, and ignored or discarded the rest (Miller and I, admittedly, have made



somewhat different selections). Also like Miller, I have never hesitated to use what I have gleaned for my own ends, often removing the ideas quite far from anything Freud seems to have intended: I have no reason to believe, for example, that the use I have made of his notion of 'constitutional bisexuality' would have won his approval. This seems to me a creative use of, and attitude to, the texts of the past. When a text becomes 'dogma' it also becomes dead.

The problem is not so much with theories *per se*: we all need theories, so long as we don't take them too seriously. While the theory remains fluid and tentative it will do us no lasting harm; it is only when we allow it to harden into a Procrustean bed that it becomes dangerous, its first victim being the theorist him/herself. Though Miller appears to repudiate theory altogether, I am confident that one could deduce at least the constituent *elements* of a theory from her work. There is the same problem with her attitude to ideologies; she appears to imply that, because she goes direct to concrete experience, her work miraculously exists outside *any* ideology, which would seem to be an obvious impossibility. There is, however, an important distinction to be made between strict 'dogmatic' adherence to either a theory or an ideology that has been defined and labelled, and a rejection of such adherence in favour of a freer, more fluid intercourse with various sets of ideas and assumptions, which can be then examined critically and with a healthy scepticism as to their claims to any final or absolute validity: one can argue that it is impossible to live outside 'ideology,' without feeling bound to commit oneself irrevocably to an ideology with an official name. The crucial necessity, in that case, is to be ready to subject *all* one's assumptions to careful, critical scrutiny, recognizing that those assumptions must be ideological. I shall argue later that Miller sometimes fails to make this recognition — that certain unexamined and untested assumptions seriously flaw and impede her work, holding her back from the truly radical perceptions to which its logic tends. For the *unconscious* elements in our ideology are always reactionary: they have been inherited from the dominant norms of the culture, and such legacies should always be carefully scrutinized before we accept them.

It is when a theory (or ideology) ossifies into dogma that various dangers set in: 1. Adherents to the theory become unable to seriously consider objections to it or to countenance the possibility that other theories may have equal validity, or that the theory that has been espoused may have to be rejected in part or *in toto*. 2. The theory takes precedence over experience, so that the experience (whether of people, events, ideas, works of art, etc.) has to be mutilated and distorted to force it to fit the theory, rather than the theory modified in the light of new experience. 3. The theory becomes detached from the immediate cultural situation and historical moment that gave birth to it, and is regarded (at least tacitly) as having universal and eternal validity.

It seems to me that Freud himself to varying degrees fell a victim to all three of these dangers (it would be very surprising if this were *not* the case), but especially to the third. His theories were derived from his discoveries as a practicing doctor and analyst within a historically and culturally specific time and place: upper-middle-class Vienna, c. 1900. One should always distinguish between the *discoveries* (which one can generally trust, relating them firmly to their context) and the *theories*, which must be approached with careful scepticism. It would be extremely dangerous to *assume* that the theories were valid even for that time and place, since Freud's ideological conditioning and position would certainly have influenced their formation (some of his 'discoveries' seem

capable of readings quite different from the theories he drew from them — or imposed on them). To treat them as if they were permanently and universally valid seems downright lunacy, though it is also common human error. However, it is one thing for Freud to have succumbed to this temptation, quite another for analysts and film theorists today to perpetuate the same blunder. Yet concepts like 'the primal scene,' 'castration,' 'the Oedipus complex,' seem in general still to be circulating precisely as Freud understood them, without modification. The kind of sleight-of-hand, or 'doublethink,' that goes on in so much of our 'advanced' critical/theoretical writing — and is in fact necessary to sustain it — constantly amazes me. The theorist in one sentence waxes eloquent about the need to be aware of historical-cultural specificity, and in the next appeals to the 'Oedipal complex' or the 'Imaginary' as if these concepts represented a truth established and certified for all time.

If there ever *was* such a thing as the Oedipus complex, then it seems far more reasonable to see it as being induced by the parents within a specific cultural environment rather than arising inevitably out of the child's development: I find it somewhat easier to believe that a deprived, dependent, housebound and sexually frustrated mother would *arouse* sexual responses in her male child than to believe that the little boy would spontaneously discover that he wants to screw her (of all people!) — and similarly with fathers and little girls. Of course, in that case the term 'Oedipus complex' is quite simply inaccurate and misleading, and should be abandoned forthwith. As for the 'castration complex,' Freud worked in a milieu and period in which it was common — this is well documented — for parents to threaten their little boys with castration, usually as a punishment for masturbation (perhaps not so often the direct 'Do that and it will drop off'). At least our culture has progressed far enough for today's students to greet this information with incredulity. Has *nothing* happened to the 'castration complex' in the interim? Is no one interested in trying to find out? And as for the 'primal scene,' its power obviously resides in the secrecy and terrible shame — what D.H. Lawrence called 'the dirty little secret' — in which all sexuality was shrouded. One would like to know what happens to the 'primal scene' (a cornerstone in the structure of Freudian theory) if parents copulate naked and quite without shame on the nursery floor with baby clambering over their bodies, gurgling and cooing. (I'm not suggesting that this happens all that frequently even today; but if it did, there would surely be no 'primal scene' any more, and one of the major sources of childhood trauma would be eliminated). I hope no one will think that I am positing that we now live in — or are even close to realizing — the best of all possible psychic worlds; but it seems equally absurd to assume that psychic structures have not changed one iota from upper-middle-class Vienna, c. 1900.

I have discussed elsewhere (in the chapter on Brian De Palma in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*) the problems arising out of the confusion (or failure to establish clear distinctions) between the literal and symbolic use of terms. I feel now even more strongly that this confusion is for many people an actual obstacle to taking progressive steps they might otherwise be ready to welcome. Language is very powerful and resonant, and what we call things is important — a rose might not smell as sweet to us if we suddenly decided to call it a stinkweed. A word like 'castration' immediately evokes, and cannot *but* evoke, strong and horrifying images, both visual and tactile. If by the 'phallus' we mean the power that comes from social position, professional standing, or the acquisition of money, then I think it would be better to use



those terms. Andrew Britton makes a valiant attempt to persuade us that men could learn to view 'castration' positively, in his account of *Bringing up Baby* in the monograph on Cary Grant published in *CineAction!* 7, but I think the term remains somewhat forbidding. The film actually makes the distinction very clear: by its end, we are to understand that David Huxley has become more *alive* (more sexual, more potent), by the very act of relinquishing his patriarchal position and prestige. If by 'castration' we mean 'the loss of patriarchal authority,' then I think again that it would be better to say so. As a male I don't wish to be castrated, but as a feminist I certainly want to relinquish any authority or power that accrues to me simply because of male privilege or ideological function.

Before returning to the Oedipus complex (as the central and most problematic component of Freudian drive theory), I shall sum up this section by repeating a sentence of Miller's already quoted above: "The form such shaping takes is culturally determined and subject to the vicissitudes of society; it must be explored anew by every generation and be understood within the particular context of each individual life." One may apply that — as a critic — to the 'individual life' of a film (which *always* derives, ultimately, from personal creativity), as much as to the individual life of a human being.

\*\*\*

I have — in my habitually cowardly and conformist way — long accepted the Oedipus complex as a 'given,' as dogma; I have never *felt* it, in my heart (or my gut). Psychoanalysis has its easy answer to that (indeed, it is an all-purpose, ready-made answer to any objection to its dogma): I have repressed my own Oedipal conflicts, so of course I can't experience them consciously. But this does not constitute proof of their existence: it *could* be true, but its truth is both unproven and unprovable. Only dogma proclaims it to be the case. Isn't there in fact something quite deathly about Freud and his Oedipal complex, and everyone's eagerness to swallow it? — as if he knew himself to be trapped, and so wanted to entrap everyone else? Entrapment becomes 'the human condition.' Not to mention the whole interminable and impregnable Lacanian version of human hopelessness and determinism. For Freud there could be no revolution: it was both impracticable and undesirable, and we must on no account encourage our children to be revolutionaries. There was only a steady, inexorable march of civilisation towards greater and greater repression, neurosis, and the triumph of the death instinct. For Lacanians, the notion of revolution is merely laughable: we can only pass predeterministically from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, substituting one form of phantom and inauthentic existence for another, and at the same time — 'we' being men — pushing women out of the Symbolic into their choice between castration and psychosis. And all this is only theory, hardened into dogma and masquerading as certain knowledge. While it remains unproven we have the right to choose it or not. That contemporary film theory has chosen it does not vouch for its 'truth' but clearly has its own significance. The deathliness of the theory is reflected in the deathliness of the prose it has produced — the pretentious verbiage, the convoluted sentences, the jargon, the sense of a purely cerebral excitation suggesting an incessant intellectual masturbation. All accompanied, of course, by the perverse denial of the reality of human creativity, reducing all human expression to a mechanistic and predetermined manipulation of 'signs.' We have lived through a whole generation of theoreticians and aestheticians who have turned 'creativity' into the ultimate dirty word. I feel deeply

ashamed now that I have, up to a certain point, allowed them to intimidate me. Only human creativity can hope to transform, and save, our civilisation.

If Freud and his Oedipal complex leave me blank, Miller's books have swiftly evoked memories of the events of my childhood, some which I had actually forgotten (repressed?), others of which I had never hitherto grasped the significance. The notion that I ever wanted to possess my mother sexually evokes nothing in me whatever, stirs no memories, strikes no chords. But, reading Miller, I was suddenly struck by the fact that — my father being abroad for long stretches of my childhood — she half-allowed, half-encouraged me to sleep in her bed with her up to the age of 12 (when I was sent off to boarding-school). At the same time, she made me feel very guilty about this — the desire for it had to be entirely mine, a nuisance she put up with, and I was behaving 'like a baby.' I am sure that all I wanted was to cuddle up to her for comfort and reassurance, for both of which I had a great need (though she made it impossible to satisfy the need without the penalty of guilt): I never experienced the slightest genital stimulation, unless I have repressed the memory totally. I don't believe, either, that she ever 'did' anything to me (again, unless I have repressed the memory), but it now seems to me interesting that I was the only male to whom she had access (she was well into her 40s when I was born, and my brothers were, respectively, 12 and 14 years older than myself).

It is also true that I disliked my father, though it is difficult to believe that I hated him as a rival. I hated him because he was (when present) bad-tempered and unapproachable, constantly taking out his frustrations on his children, for whom he claimed to have sacrificed his career as an artist or architect (he seems only to have dabbled in either vocation), and because my mother (with whom I identified strongly — or tried to) was patently afraid of him. In fact, I would have loved to be close to him, but — even allowing for his long absences — his personality made it impossible. I have recalled childhood nightmares which can certainly be interpreted (probably correctly) in terms of a desire to kill him, but they seem to have been provoked entirely by his dictatorial attitude and my mother's passive suffering. This seems to me a far more convincing — and culturally specific, as I don't think my familial circumstances were particularly exceptional — explanation of the phenomenon of children's hatred of their fathers than the Oedipus complex (one of my sisters hated him also). The young male child doesn't understand — because he hasn't yet been 'socialized' (wonderful word!) — why his mother has to suffer and feel herself inferior. He hates his father because he grasps intuitively that it is he who places her in this position. Clearly, it was an explanation Freud couldn't countenance: he would have had to become a feminist, and he had internalized patriarchal authority as, by and large, natural and beneficent. Therefore, the hatred must be the child's fault: he hated his father because he desired his mother. The father is thereby exonerated. It becomes difficult to understand why feminist psychoanalytics has swallowed the Oedipal complex whole, without question or dissent (though there have been attempts to circumvent it, by emphasizing the importance of the pre-Oedipal stage).

The Oedipal complex — or, more widely, the 'Oedipal trajectory,' taking in the complete Freudian progress to the resolution of the castration complex through identification with the Father — has appeared very useful in analyzing films and classical narratives in general (Barthes suggested, very influentially, that *all* our realist narratives are Oedipal dramas). This, in reverse, has been taken as validating the



Freudian theory: if so many of our artifacts can be shown to reproduce its outline, then surely it must be correct? Miller's work has led me to question this: if not to reject it outright, at least to reopen the issue for discussion. It is beginning to seem to me that the recurrent structures of our narratives can be as accurately, and more flexibly, described without recourse to Freudian drive theory and, in reverse, that drive theory has indeed tended to become a 'Procrustean bed.'

Let me take an example from my own work: the analysis of Scorsese's *King of Comedy* in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. I choose it because (a) the analysis is built entirely upon the 'Oedipal trajectory,' (b) I do not wish to exempt my own work from my criticisms of contemporary critical practice, and (c) it is one of the pieces I would choose as representing my work at its least deficient, fulfilling the function of criticism in offering an interpretation that is not transparently obvious, supporting it by a detailed examination of the film's structure, and thereby demonstrating that the film works on deeper levels than have been generally recognized: interpretation issuing in (r)evaluation. I think the analysis, in essentials, stands up, and I am not proposing to retract it. What I now question is whether the Freudian terminology in which it is couched, and the drive theory that terminology inevitably implies, is helpful or necessary, or rather an incumbrance.

My argument is that the film reproduces the structures of the traditional family in order to subject them (for once) to the most astringent criticism. Rupert/Robert De Niro, father-less and living alone with his mother, who is heard but never seen, and whom Rupert treats as a mere irrelevant

nuisance, is motivated singlemindedly and obsessively by the desire to be recognized by, and to express his identification with, his chosen father-figure Jerry/Jerry Lewis, a nationally celebrated talk-show host and comedian. He is joined in this quest by Jerry's equally obsessive female fan Marsha/Sandra Bernhard, who wishes to gain Jerry's recognition by seducing him and having him love her. They form a tense and uneasy alliance (more rivals than allies) that vividly evokes sibling rivalry. At the same time, Rupert is trying to use the prestige he will gain by appearing on Jerry's TV show as a means of impressing the woman he has singled out for himself, Rita/Diahanne Abbott, whom he also wants Jerry to recognize.

It is easy to see how snugly this fits into Freud's 'Oedipal trajectory,' or more precisely into its final stages, the resolution of the complexes (the fascination of Scorsese's film is that instead of celebrating the satisfaction and plenitude of that resolution, it mercilessly exposes its barrenness). And the Freudian terminology has its advantages, its familiarity making possible the succinct expression of complex ideas. Its adoption, however, brings with it implications to which nothing in the film corresponds: that, as a young child, Rupert desired sexually to possess his mother and wished his father dead; that he was (or felt) threatened with castration for this; that he has learnt to accept this castration on the understanding that one day he will find his own mother substitute. (There must, of course, be parallel implications for the Bernhard character).

In our culture the traditional father is a figure of power (outside the home), the traditional mother figure of powerlessness (granted a qualified power within the home as com-



The need to acquire a woman and the woman's resistance: Robert De Niro and Diahanne Abbott in *King of Comedy*.





Barren 'fulfilment': the triumph of Rupert Pupkin.

pensation). I am becoming steadily less convinced that it is necessary or helpful to describe these in terms of 'possession of the phallus' and 'castration.' Perhaps the phallus is not quite what it used to be; perhaps we don't take it quite so seriously any more; perhaps it is on its way to becoming just a penis. The ideology that was doubtless once grounded in the prestige of the phallus lingers on, with increasingly insecure foundation: insisted upon, in the '80s, perhaps precisely *because* of that, the insistence betraying itself by becoming hysterical, with a growing incidence of rape, that pathetic giveaway. Perhaps male privilege has finally to shed its last ghostly remnants of phallic mystique before it crumbles into dust, but by and large the mystique has failed and without its aura male power is revealed as something merely artificial and arbitrary, like Jerry's prestige as a talk-show host on an obviously inane 'entertainment.'

The male child's ambivalent feelings for his father (hatred, resentment, fascination, attraction, fear — the desire to reject and the desire to emulate) do not have to be seen in terms of *sexual* rivalry and innate infantile drives, nor do the female child's corresponding feelings towards her mother. Children of our culture are *completely* powerless, virtually deprived of human rights, totally at the mercy of the adults around them (a battered wife at least has the option of calling the police, even if her conditioning and economic circumstances dissuade her). Rupert's desire to be recognized by his 'father' (portrayed in the film as an empty signifier, a barren icon) and then, when that desire is frustrated, to displace and replace him, is perfectly comprehensible in non-sexual terms outside and independent of the drive theory. So, in fact, is his desire to possess his own woman and show off his possession

to the 'father': it is one of the chief means by which male power is established and demonstrated. (It is interesting that Rupert at no point expresses the slightest sexual desire for Rita). And if Marsha's desire to be recognized by Jerry takes a sexual form, that is surely because that is the form our culture decrees as the correct one for a woman: the fact that Marsha identifies Jerry with her father makes perfect sense without recourse to theories of infantile sexuality.

Besides the fact that the Freudian terminology seems superfluous and misleading, I think it carries certain danger. The first I have already discussed: the unfortunate consequences of the use of the terms 'phallus' and 'castration' in a context that wishes to promote social change and the acceptance of feminist principle. No healthy man would like to be castrated; an increasing number of healthy men (it is even becoming a criterion for 'health') would like to relinquish their ideologically constructed and ratified positions of power, authority and domination. To describe the latter as 'castration' seems very much the reverse of helpful.

The graver danger is closely connected to this. If we adopt the Freudian terminology, we adopt with it the whole tendency to essentialism — the essentialism is inherent in the terminology. Freud saw the Oedipal trajectory as universal and unalterable, a process that all children must pass through in order to reach maturity, necessitated by their own innate drives. Adopting such an assumption makes radical social change impossible. (Is this, in fact, precisely why so many of our 'advanced' theoreticians have adopted it? — they can have the nice warm rosy feeling of being radical and progressive while knowing that nothing can or need be changed, their lives can continue untransformed.) However, if we



relinquish the drive theory and see what Freud mistook for an inevitable, universal process as the product of specific social structures, then change immediately becomes thinkable and various strategies can be elaborated to effect it. In other words, in place of drive theory we simply need a clear awareness of the structures of patriarchy. (I am assuming agreement that 'patriarchy' is not a theory but a concretely verifiable phenomenon).

At this point one of those lucky accidents that happen at times to all of us, chance gifts we should never refuse, had led me to interrupt the course I had planned for this article: two hours after writing the above passage (it was on Christmas Eve), I was sitting in a movie theatre watching Spielberg's *Always*. Like most of Spielberg's films, it seems immediately to invite the Oedipal interpretation: it ends with 'The Father' (Pete/Richard Dreyfuss) at last relinquishing his hold over 'the Woman,' part wife, part daughter (Dorinda/Holly Hunter) and turning her over to 'the son' (Ted/Brad Johnson), before sadly withdrawing into obscurity (like Bambi's father at the end of the Disney movie). Old habits die hard: my immediate reaction was despair, and an impulse to come home and tear up this article. Doesn't this film prove all over again, I thought, that all our narratives do indeed endlessly reproduce, in one form or another, the Oedipal trajectory? And if I hadn't just been reading Miller, I would probably have left the film at that, neatly pigeonholed (or straightjacketed). However, with Miller close behind me, I resisted the pull of dogma and began to think. One immediate reflection: Can the Oedipal trajectory in fact exist 'in one form or another'? Isn't its form by definition unalterable? Isn't any significant variation on it something else again?

Let us begin with the experiment of fitting *Always* into its 'Procrustean bed' (the result will be parody, admittedly, but I think the parody will strike a chord in readers familiar with the blanket application of Oedipus to our movies). The crux of the Oedipal trajectory is that the son (literally or symbolically) kills the Father in order to win the Woman. *Always* offers a certain resistance to this (though to our Oedipal theorists the resistance will be transparent): Pete is killed saving the life of his Best Friend/John Goodman, before he has even properly made the Son's acquaintance. The problem can be resolved very simply by the most elementary application of Freudian dream theory. What we have here is a *displacement*: in fact, a *triple* displacement. All narratives reproduce the Oedipal trajectory, in which the son kills the Father; therefore, we can see at once that the Best Friend is here merely a dream-substitute for the Son (Displacement 1). In the film, the Best Friend has no intention of causing the Father's death. A transparent subterfuge: as the Best Friend is really the Son (in dream disguise), then of course he intends (on the *psychoanalytic* level) the Father's death (Displace 2). In the film — on its naive level of narrative statement, which of course we cannot possibly take seriously — the Best Friend, if he is in love with anybody, appears to be in love with, not the Woman, but the Father (Displacement 3). Most transparent subterfuge of all: obviously, as the Woman stands for the Mother, the film cannot say that the Best Friend, who is really the Son, and who unintentionally has the intention of killing the Father, is in love with her. So it says he is in love with the Father. (Dear Reader, I should have wrapped all this up in more pretentious language so that you would have felt more intimidated by it. Without such intimidation, there is the terrible risk that you may think it sounds rather silly . . . ).

*Always* is of course very much preoccupied with the figure of the Father — in other words with the status of patriarchal

authority — at a certain phase of cultural evolution. The question is whether the application to this of the Oedipus complex and drive theory is of the least help, or whether it would merely tend, yet again, to 'universalize' the film's historical-cultural specificity. It should be noted, for a start, that Pete becomes a father-figure, invested with the power to guide the development of the younger characters, only after his death. Prior to that, the relationship between him and Dorinda can be much better (because far more flexibly) described in terms of variations on the traditional male and female notes developed within the patriarchal ideology (i.e., the product of the culture, not of innate drives) — roles which the characters simultaneously cling to and resist. That the traditional function of those roles (the production of socially 'correct' men and women who will reproduce the patriarchal structures) corresponds loosely to the outcome of the 'Oedipal trajectory' is obvious enough. What is at issue is whether we are talking about a process that is inevitable (because the result of drives within the human infant) or capable of transformation (because the product of specific cultural conditioning that is *transmitted* to the human infant). If we believe the latter, then the Freudian terminology is misleading and mystificatory.

The most obvious problem within the Pete/Dorinda relationship stems from that cornerstone of ideological tension, the 'wandering/settling antinomy' (to adopt Wollen's famous phrase). It can be seen to structure all the Hollywood genres, developing a different inflection and emphasis in each, and much that might seem at first glance very far removed from them — think, for example, of *Taxi Zum Klo*. In terms of the flying movie it received one of its classic statements in *Only Angels Have Wings*, which provides a useful comparison for *Always* (it antedated *A Guy Named Joe*, of which Spielberg's film is a surprisingly close remake, by only four years). In *Always*, once again, we have the male adventurer's obsession with danger, with risking his life to test himself, and the woman's dread that one day he will 'not come back.' The reverse side of this is Pete's desire to (re-)construct Dorinda in terms of traditional femininity: the birthday gift of a beautiful gown. The film modifies and complicates this apparently simple opposition in a number of ways:

- a) Dorinda makes it clear to Pete that her objection is not to his risking his life, but to his risking it *needlessly*: if he took risks in order to save others, she could accept it.
- b) Dorinda herself — who dresses habitually in 'masculine' clothes and is consistently self-assertive — has ambitions to be a flier and fire-fighter, which she demonstrates near the beginning of the film as a protest to Pete, and realizes in the climax at the end under his guidance.
- c) There is a strong implication that the two are attracted to each other for precisely those qualities that they seek to modify.
- d) Dorinda's response to the birthday gift (the cry of 'Girl clothes!') is complex in its mixture of delight and irony. The response suggests that she acknowledges the pull of the traditional 'feminine' role and enjoys surrendering to the pleasure of being, for a moment, the centre of the communal male gaze (not only Pete's!), but that at the same time she sees this as a form of play. The film's ambivalence about this is beautifully realized in the already celebrated scene (not in the original) where Dorinda, after her dinner with Ted, puts on the dress to 'dance with Pete' (now dead), not knowing that, as a spirit, he is actually there with her in the room: the dominant tone is nostalgia (for a lost relationship, for traditional gender-roles), but at the same time the film presents this as





The limitations of patriarchal control: Richard Dreyfuss, Holly Hunter and Brad Johnson in *Always*.

something Dorinda must pass beyond and get over if she is to 'live.'

e) On their last night together Pete (in sharp contrast to the intransigence of the Cary Grant character in *Only Angels Have Wings*) accedes to Dorinda's demand that he retire from firefighting and become a flying instructor to train others.

f) When Pete dies the next day, it is because he risks his life to save another man (a motive Dorinda recognized as valid), not from any mere urge to be a 'daredevil.'

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of the film, but I want to glance at the ending to consider how its tensions are resolved. I have already asserted that after his death, Pete becomes involved with the authority of a father-figure (the internalized father, the characters he affects registering his advice without actually hearing his words). This, however, is also too simple: the film presents Pete's authority as having significant limitations. (It is interesting that Pete's authority-figure, the angle Hap, is female: in *A Guy Named Joe* Audrey Hepburn's role was played by that monument of patriarchy Lionel Barrymore). This is established clearly in his inability to deflect Ted from being in love with Dorinda and, less strongly, in his inability to prevent Dorinda from responding to Ted (he retains his own hold over her until he voluntarily 'lets go'). In other words, he is able to *help* the characters fulfil their aims but he is powerless to prevent them from pursuing those aims or to impose his own aims on them (if we see him as a father, one might argue that the film is here defining what a father's proper role should be). Crucially, he is unable to prevent Dorinda from flying the plane in the climactic mission, an action that realizes (a) her desire to save Ted, whom she replaces, (b) her desire to save others, and (c) her own ambition to prove herself in the 'man's world.' If Pete is exercising a form of internalized patriarchal authority

in guiding her through the mission, he is simultaneously sacrificing his control over her desire. In fact, at the end, Pete and the film have constructed a relationship of equality between Dorinda and Ted, bringing both to the same point of development, no longer 'masculine' and 'feminine' but simply male and female; at which point the 'father' can depart into the past, leaving them to work out their future.

I hope it will not appear that I am trying to offer *Always* as some profoundly radical statement about gender: it takes no great leaps ahead. It does, however, sensitively register various impulses and complexities which the usual reductionist Oedipal reading would tend to erase. Obviously, those 'various impulses and complexities' have surfaced at several phases in the evolution of 20th century culture: ideologically, the film makes no advance on *A Guy Named Joe*. If *Always* improves significantly on its source, it is partly because Spielberg has considerably tightened the structure, eliminating the original's slack and directionless middle section, partly because Irene Dunne was seriously miscast in a role that might have been conceived for Katharine Hepburn, partly because Dreyfuss and Hunter work much better as a team than the oddly matched Dunne and Spencer Tracy. However, it is good to find such complexities resurfacing in the reactionary '80s, and in the work of a director one had regarded as the archetypal '80s filmmaker.

\*\*\*

As Miller refuses to crystalize her findings into a theory, she offers us critics no general basis for a new criticism that might replace the current models. This is probably just as well: her function is that of liberation (above all, from the Freudian/Lacanian straightjacket), and there seems no pressing need to replace one Procrustean bed with another. On the





Trauma and vengefulness: Liv Ullmann in *Persona*.

other hand, the logical conclusions to which her work seems to me to lead (though she has not so far ventured to explore them) have widespread and radical cultural implications that would certainly affect our reading of films. The second part of this article will consider some of these. There are, however, certain films and groups of films to which Miller's work has *direct* relevance, reopening work that we have come to take for granted: I think particularly Ingmar Bergman. Bergman himself was clearly an abused child — we have his own accounts as evidence, and his testimony that the horrifying anecdote related by Max von Sydow in *Hour of the Wolf* was based closely on his own childhood experience ('not once but many times'). The personal, often confessional nature of Bergman's work has always been obvious, and is often held to be a major limitation. When we confront the reality of child abuse in its myriad forms, it can be seen as a major strength, and much more than personal in its implications. I think a thorough re-examination of Bergman's films in the light of Miller's researches and arguments might prove extremely profitable. Think, for example of the two sisters in *The Silence* and their very different (but equally maiming) relationships to their father (explicit or implied), and of the variation on this in the sisters of *Cries and Whispers*. The severely damaged adults — often avenging themselves for their hurt in acts of physical and psychic violence — of films like *Persona*, *Hour of the Wolf* and *A Passion*, might illuminatingly be reinterpreted from the starting-points Miller provides. *Wild Strawberries* comes alive all over again when one

looks at it from a Millerian perspective; so does Woody Allen's close reworking of it, *Another Woman*, where the gender transpositions, female for male (almost perfectly systematic, the one exception being the substitution of Gena Rowlands' brother for Victor Sjöström's son), produce very interesting variations on Bergman's schema. The result of such an investigation might be to discover in the works the political dimension (in the wildest sense) that they have often been found to lack.

## II

I pass to a consideration of why Miller's work so far — impressive as it is — cannot stand as an alternative to the Freudian tradition but only as a challenging and stimulating intervention. To put it succinctly, she offers no account of how gender is constructed within our culture. I would add that it is not clear to me that we *need* such an alternative: our current, and perhaps adequate, notions of gender construction really depend on an understanding of family structures and family dynamics, not on 'drive theory.' It is perfectly possible to understand how male and female infants are taught 'masculinity' and 'femininity' respectively, without recourse to a belief that they have innate tendencies to desire the parent of the opposite sex. To reiterate a point made earlier: if something like the 'Oedipus complex' exists, it is imposed on children by their parents within a highly specific



historical/cultural situation — whereupon it can no longer appropriately be called the 'Oedipus complex.'

In many ways Miller's cultural analysis is startlingly, even shockingly, audacious and radical — sufficiently so to ensure that many people, for a variety of reasons, do not wish to hear about it. Her thesis goes far beyond the belief — now supported by overwhelming evidence — that far more children suffer sexual abuse than Freud could allow himself to credit was possible. She sees child-abuse in many diverse forms (sexual, physical, psychological) as a pervasive component and product of the child-rearing methods regarded as normal within the culture, starting from (and even *during* — see *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*) the delivery of the baby and continuing right through childhood and adolescence via the child's treatment by parents, older siblings and other adults and throughout our educational system. She maintains that *recognition* of this virtually all-pervasive abuse — by society in general, but crucially by the victims themselves — is prevented or at least severely compromised and inhibited by the respect we are all taught to feel towards our parents (the fourth commandment has no equivalent commanding parents to honour their children). She sees 'the roots of violence' (see the subtitle of *For Your Own Good*) as developing in early childhood, the result of repressed traumas (the chapter on Hitler's childhood is extraordinary, and as suggestive politically as it is convincing psychoanalytically). I have no doubt whatever of the importance of her work: it is essential reading for every parent and every educator, and for every victim of the family and the educational system, in other words for everyone, as we are all such victims. I have personally found her books both compelling and liberating: she has sent me back into my own childhood, and I have learnt much from the journey that has helped me towards a resolution of present problems.

In other and very important ways, however, she is not radical enough. The problems arise when one asks about (a) causes and (b) solutions. The answers one gets strike me as weak and unsatisfying, in both cases, and this is due in part to her resistance to theory and ideology in *any* form, in part to her reluctance to attempt an analysis of social structures. If one asks of the books, *Why* do adults in our culture treat children like this?, the only answer one is offered is, Because that's how the adults were treated by *their* parents — they internalized it as the correct way, taught to honour their fathers and mothers. And so on, one presumes, back through generation after generation. The 'Why?' remains ultimately a mystery. Similarly, if one asks, How can this situation be remedied, how can these horrors be stopped?, one is offered something like, By making people more aware, by revealing the truth: then they will behave better. Miller's urgent desire to 'make people aware' and 'reveal the truth' is admirable — it is what gives her writing its compelling force. But suppose the cruelty and violence are inherent in, and the result of, existing social structures and our social and sexual arrangements? While these structures and arrangements continue in essentials unchanged, is it likely that there will be any radical transformation, as opposed to partial and precarious alleviation? One suspects that the abuse will merely take subtler, less visible forms.

Take the central social institution of marriage-and-family, the 'patriarchal nuclear family' as we have it, which Miller (while apparently recognizing the manifold horrors that are its products), appears to leave intact. In our culture, marriages are supposed (ideally!) to have their origin in sexual attraction/romantic love; the basis of the marriage is the promise of sexual exclusiveness (monogamy), amounting

traditionally to the man's possession and containment of the woman. We all know that in most cases sexual passion and romantic love (not necessarily synonymous and perhaps best regarded as two distinct but occasionally coexistent phenomena) do not last forever, or even for very long, though the *illusion* of their permanence can sometimes be sustained by a mutual act of will. When they wane, however, the promise of exclusivity ('... forsaking all others ... till death do us part ...') lingers on: one is expected to continue in a monogamous relationship with someone to whom one is no longer strongly attached on the sexual level. The result can be nothing but extreme frustration — assuaged, perhaps, by a little furtive 'cheating,' a bit of passion-on-the-side, probably bringing in its wake harmful and destructive guilt feelings. But then there are always children — one's own or other people's: dependent, generally submissive beings, needing one's love, longing to please, easily available ... Not a very *nice* idea, admittedly, and the practice not even very satisfying, but better than nothing, so why not? After all, the child probably won't even remember ...

Of course, it would be naive to suppose that simple sexual frustration is the only — or even the main — source of the abuse of children by parents (or uncles and aunts, older siblings, baby-sitters ...). It seems more likely that the main source is the power drive, intrinsic to patriarchy, monstrously exacerbated by capitalism: the power drive or its underside, that constant nagging, undermining sense of possible inferiority. For the husband who thought he was acquiring a submissive, adoring, obedient woman (as the marriage service guaranteed) ... For the wife who thought she was loving, honouring and obeying a man who would always desire her sexually ... For the satisfaction of all these disappointments and disillusionments, all this frustrated drive for power, domination and possession, aren't there available and, if not exactly willing, at least *submissive* objects? And, if one is too scrupulous to abuse them sexually or even physically, well, there are other forms of satisfaction, other ways of expressing a sense of power and applying band-aids to one's wounded ego. In terms of the individual psyche, the drive for power and domination obviously originates within the hierarchy of the patriarchal nuclear family, wherein the males learn their power (and fear of losing it) and the females their powerlessness (and resentment of it), and wherein every child is taught humiliation and the sense of inferiority as daily lessons.

It is surely clear by now to everyone who has been permitted by the culture to achieve any moderate degree of awareness (or who has merely exchanged anecdotes and reminiscences with her/his friends) that all neurosis, all social ills that do not issue from economic factors, from poverty and underprivilege, are bred within the family as we know it. What else is the Hollywood melodrama about, at bottom? Only that it doesn't work, and can't possibly work: 'the couple,' 'the family,' 'romantic love' — the great melodramas of the classical period testify to the fact that these were already obsolete concepts. Thus *There's Always Tomorrow* juxtaposes the family and romantic love in order to reveal them as opposite but complementary 'imitations of life'; thus *The Reckless Moment* (its perfect complement) shows its heroine tragically accepting her reimprisonment within a system whose barrenness and repressiveness the film has thoroughly exposed; thus *Duel in the Sun* exposes the hopeless and destructive contradictions in ideology and shows them to be unresolvable — unresolvable, that is, within the existing system. It was impossible, of course, for the films to abandon these concepts: the power of ideology (not to mention the





The dramatization of impossible ideological contradiction: *Duel in the Sun*

Motion Picture Code, the embodiment of ideology at its crudest and most retrograde) was too strong, and the imagining of alternatives strictly tabu. So the films did the only thing they could decently and honestly do: they laid bare the hypocrisy, the oppressiveness, the cruelty, of these social conventions, the intolerance strains and contradictions within which lives in our culture are lived. This is what — independent, perhaps, of conscious intention, which is never more than the tip of the iceberg and it was the other seven-eighths that sank the Titanic — the great melodramas of Sternberg, Hitchcock, Ophuls, Sirk, Minnelli and Vidor tell us: that it is really all over if we would only recognize it, it doesn't work anymore, if it ever did it was only because people accepted and internalized their oppression: the couple, the family, possession, dependence, sacrifice, 'cheating,' the double standard, the whole single and indissoluble syndrome must be jettisoned and other ways of relating found. Alice Miller should (from the mass of evidence she produces) know this very well. Yet even she appears reluctant to denounce the patriarchal nuclear family as an institution and propose alternatives: perhaps, to do that, she would have to venture into theory. Her refusal of theory seems the ultimate obstacle to her having a major influence on contemporary thought. But is 'theory' the right word here? I mean rather the drawing of conclusions from readily verifiable data. What militates against this drawing of conclusion would threaten at its very foundations. Miller, stopping short at verifiable data — on which she is incomparable, and beyond comparison important — remains, so far (tragically, in my

opinion), the prisoner of an ideology which she unable to recognize as such but which the whole tendency of her work threatens at its very roots.

What *are* the alternatives? The most successful marriages are built upon communality of interests and mutual sympathy and supportiveness, though even these are often threatened by expectations of sexual exclusivity, the absurd but still prevalent notion that this is the criterion for 'fidelity,' which is responsible for the grossly disproportionate importance our civilisation attributes to the sexual act. Sex should be regarded as a normal daily activity, like eating and drinking (does one always have to go to the same restaurant?) An obvious alternative arrangement would be for sexual relations (including even the most violent and intense sexual passion, for which one should have a profound respect but which is no basis for marriage whatever) to take place *outside* marriage, not as 'cheating' but as accepted social custom. The marriage could then be a coming together of people who are intellectually and emotionally capable (this need not, of course, *exclude* sexuality: there is no point in substituting one exclusivity for another). This would mean relinquishing the whole antiquated obsession with biological parentage (at least for the male); turn, as well it logically might, to various forms of communal living and sharing and freer modes of intercourse (both social and sexual), so much the better. We might learn at last to stop sticking labels on relationships ('This is my spouse, this is my lover, this is my friend'), which invariably acts as a restriction to their potential. Our entire culture is vitiated by the obsession with possession, rooted in



the commitment to private ownership and patriarchy, monstrously encouraged and fostered by the development of capitalism and consumerism. That we think we own our children — or have any rights over them whatever — seems particularly hideous: they are human beings who should be entitled to full human rights, including, for example, the right to summon the police and institute legal proceedings if they are subjected to any form of violence, a right we all have as adults. As adults, we also have the right to choose whom we wish to relate to. Ideally, children should have the same right, which would only become possible in forms of communal organization in which biological parentage ceased to be an issue. (It is scarcely likely, if I had any freedom of choice, that I would have *chosen* to relate to my biological parents or to my siblings, though they were probably no worse than most; it is not the individuals who are to blame, but the structures and institutions). It is probable that the family, as we have it, is the worst imaginable context within which to raise healthy children — the most likely to stifle creativity and feed neurosis.

\*\*\*

**O**f all Freud's 'discoveries,' infantile sexuality and constitutional bisexuality have proved the most difficult for our culture to accept, with intense resistance at both conscious and unconscious levels; they are also closely related. That Miller still (apparently) clings to traditional assumptions about marriage and family (a constituent of her ideology) may explain why she (even she!) can't accept them either.

I find the whole issue of infantile sexuality very difficult and confusing. I cannot follow Miller in asserting that there is no such thing — that Freud invented it in order to deflect blame from the parents and place it on the child. Freud may indeed have *used* it for that purpose, projecting 'illicit' sexual desires on to an entirely innocent (and far more fluid and indeterminate, both in aim and object) sexuality, but I find it impossible to see young children (including myself-as-child) as completely asexual.

My chief evidence for this derives from my own childhood experience, so I shall shortly make another excursion into autobiography. First, however, I want to consider what seems to me the most puzzling and perverse passage in Miller's work to date. It occurs, in fact, in the chapter of *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* entitled 'Is There Such a Thing as Infantile Sexuality?', and seems intended to prove that there isn't: I think it achieves exactly the opposite. She quotes again at great length (five pages of text) a passage from *Centuries of Childhood* by Philippe Ariès about the childhood of Louis XIII of France, in which the author draws in turn on the memoirs of the court physician Herouard. I shall select a few brief excerpts from the passage quoted (readers should of course consult Miller's book to assess the fairness of my selection):

Louis XIII was not yet one year old: "He laughed uproariously when his nanny waggled his cock with her fingers." An amusing trick which the child soon copied. Calling a page, "he shouted 'Hey, there!' and pulled up his robe, showing him his cock."

He was one year old: "In high spirits," notes Herouard, "he made everybody kiss his cock" . . . in the presence of a "little lady," he lifted up his coat, and showed her his cock with such fervour that he was quite beside himself. He lay on his back to show it to her" . . .

During his first three years nobody showed any reluc-

tance or saw any harm in jokingly touching the child's sexual parts. "The Marquise often put her hand under his coat; he got his nanny to lay him on her bed where she played with him, putting her hand under his coat" . . .

... "He was undressed and Madame too [his sister], and they were placed naked in bed with the King, where they kissed and twittered and gave great amusement to the King. The King asked him: 'Son, where is the Infanta's bundle?' [the child had been engaged to the Infanta of Spain since the age of one]. He showed it to him, saying: 'There is no bone in it, Papa.' Then, as it was slightly distended, he added: 'There it is now, there is sometime.'"

The court was amused, in fact, to see his first erections: "Waking up at eight o'clock, he called Mlle Bethouzay and said to her: 'Zezai, my cock is like a drawbridge; see how it goes up and down.' And he raised and lowered it"

After 1608 this kind of joke disappeared: he had become a little man — attaining the fateful age of seven — and at this age he had to be taught decency in language and behaviour. When he was asked how children were born, he would reply, like Molière's Agnès, "through the ear" . . .

Miller's comment on this is: 'No one at that time seems to have taken offense at the fact that adults could use the prince's sexual organ as a plaything. We mustn't forget that these same adults would claim the right to privacy in regard to this area of their own body (cf. the expression "private parts"). It is not customary in our culture for people to expose themselves and allow others to take hold of their sexual organs in public.'

— After reading the foregoing account of an apparently totally uninhibited and unashamed childhood, one is tempted to retort, 'So much the worse for them!' The passage quoted is fascinating and to me quite delightful (despite the obvious connotations of sexist bias and class privilege), but it seems quite incongruous with Miller's intention. It is difficult to regard as 'sexual abuse' behaviour which, according to the account given, the child not only greatly enjoys but encourages and often initiates. The attitude to sexuality — and especially to 'infantile sexuality' — displayed here has since become impossible: 'sexual abuse,' one might say, has replaced it, to our obvious loss. The actions described in the Louis XIII passage and the actions that now constitute 'sexual abuse' may be identical, but their social significance and their effects on the child have changed totally. Some of the central defining characteristics of 'sexual abuse' are furtiveness, secrecy, privacy, shame and fear — the shame and fear experienced by the molester being communicated to the child (who must be threatened, bribed or blackmailed into not revealing the 'terrible secret'), who thereafter internalizes the notion that sexuality is dirty, ugly, wicked, sinful, guilt-ridden, etc. How utterly different from the childhood of Louis XIII! — who, we go on to learn, 'performed twice' within a couple of hours on his wedding night, at the age of 14, emerging 'with his cock all red.' His earlier sexual experiences would seem to have been quite the reverse of traumatic. (One would wish, of course, to learn how the young bride experienced her wedding night, but the memoirs are silent on this point).

In fact, one feels that Miller should have learnt from the passage she quotes a very different lesson from the one she draws: that the trauma of 'sexual abuse' which is such a reality of our culture is induced (except, obviously, when it takes forms that are brutal, violent and physically painful) less by the act itself than by the shame, fear and secrecy that



colour it; and induced not only by the molester, but by the outraged and well-meaning adults who react with horror when the act is exposed: it is they, as much as (perhaps in many cases more than) the molester who are responsible for the child's enduring sense of defilement. One of the possible readings (and one that has strong support from the text) of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* makes precisely this point: Miles is destroyed, not by whatever it is that Quint and Miss Jessel have done, said or revealed to him, but by the good, moral governess's forcing on him a sense of evil. One of Miller's guiding tenets is 'the child is always innocent.' Precisely: in James's story, Miles's innocence remains intact throughout his dealings with the ghosts — that is, it survives what James implies, without specifying, are forms of 'sexual abuse.' It is disturbed by his expulsion from school (for talking to the other boys, still one assumes quite 'innocently,' about what happened), and finally shattered when the governess forces him to view the past events as 'evil.' When she imposes on him the view (the sexual disgust) of adult Victorian society and drives him to denounce Quint as 'You devil!' he dies and one is left with one of the most heartrending plays on words, and greatest last lines, in the English language: 'his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.'

(I hope the above will not be read by anyone as a *defense* of child abuse, which is directly contrary to my intention. My point is that Louis XIII was *not* abused — if we accept the account of Herouard as accurate — and the distinction lies not in the actions but in societal attitudes to sexuality. The same actions performed today would necessarily be experienced as abusive because that is how our culture views them and, like James's governess, we impose this view on the children).

It is particularly puzzling to find the passage quoted in the context of a chapter devoted to denying the reality of infantile sexuality. 'He lifted up his coat and showed her his cock with such fervour that he was quite beside himself' . . . 'they were placed naked in bed with the King, where they kissed and twittered and gave great amusement' . . . 'my cock is like a drawbridge; see how it goes up and down': these must strike us as, to say the least, dubious illustrations of the sexlessness of children. Again, Miller might have used the data provided here quite differently, but in a way perfectly supportive of what is most valuable and challenging in her thesis: the 'infantile sexuality' displayed here is strikingly non-Oedipal. One can certainly argue that Freud *enlisted* infantile sexuality in an unconscious desire to exonerate parents and deflect sexual guilt on to children. The account quoted at no point suggests anything but a sexuality that is perfectly innocent: there is no sense whatever that little Louis wanted to kill his father and fuck his mother, simply that he enjoyed his sexuality. And his enjoyment of it was, at least in the early years, gender-indeterminate: he enjoyed displaying his cock to males and females alike. What is disturbing in the account is the way in which, after a certain age, shame and secrecy were imposed on him by adults (*this*, one might argue, is a form of 'sexual abuse'): at the age of seven 'he *had to be taught* decency in language and behaviour' (my italics), and learnt to lie about how children are born (a portion of the passage I omitted makes it clear that he knew perfectly well). Milos Forman's *Amadeus* (though a film I do not greatly admire) is interesting and relevant here: it presents Mozart (as incarnated by the adorable and irrepressible Tom Hulce) as a person who has miraculously evaded, to some degree, what Marcuse calls 'surplus repression,' a speculation that helps to account for the otherwise inexplicable phenomenon of his music, and also for his destruction by 'society' (in the

person of the thoroughly 'socialized,' hence deeply envious, Salieri). The film, crude as it is, significantly alters the emphasis of the original play, perhaps because of Forman's (always somewhat glib and simplistic) commitment to 'alternative' lifestyles, perhaps more because of Hulce's irresistible performance.

\*\*\*

If there is no such thing as infantile sexuality, how does one explain the common phenomenon of prepubescent boys' erections? Just as weird automatic accidents? The erections of the young Louis XIII are ambiguous in this respect, as no specific sexual context or object is suggested for them. I can, however, vouch for the sexual content of my own. I vividly recall three occasions before puberty when I experienced this physical manifestation: I recall them no doubt, because they were so troubling and inexplicable, the whole business of sexuality being wrapped in shame, mystery and terror in '30s middle-class England. I couldn't just take them in my stride, as did the young Louis XIII, who had the advantage of knowing precisely what they signified.

I can pinpoint the first two occasions quite accurately, because I know where I was living at the time: they must have occurred between the ages of six and eight. They were responses to events in a book and a film respectively (I can't be certain now of the order of occurrence), and the circumstances were remarkably consistent: in both cases the 'hero' — an attractive figure with whom I identified emotionally — turned out at the end to be the 'villain,' and was consequently subjected to a violent and horrible death. The physical reaction was accompanied (provoked?) by feelings of overwhelming tenderness and compassion: I didn't care in the least that the guy had done 'bad' things, I just wanted to protect and save him. From the age of about ten (still pre-puberty: I was not an early developer) much of my imaginative life was devoted to elaborating erotic fantasies about men (never boys of my own age). These always imaginary persons were never father-figures (if one theorizes the father in terms of authority): quite the contrary — they always needed my help. A favourite fantasy involved hiding an escaped murderer from the police (usually in my bed), protecting him, caring for him, redeeming him through my tenderness. The acts we performed together were somewhat vague, as at that age I didn't even know the basic 'facts of life' (as they were called), let alone the facts of homosexual practice; but they were certainly highly erotic and always very sexually stimulating. I see this as the formation of the positive side of my adult sexuality: the capacity for tenderness and caring. The negative side — a general inability to experience great sexual pleasure in my own right, deriving pleasure vicariously from the pleasure I give to others — I attribute decisively to my familial environment, with my father playing a crucial role. My other most vivid memory from the same period — i.e. before the age of eight, when my father mercifully left England for the United States, where he remained throughout World War II, selling the antiques my mother shipped out to him — is of the ritual of the 'spreadeagle.' My father (a strong, heavy man) had me lie on the ground on my back. He would then lie on top of me, pinning down my limbs, and proceed to tickle me violently under the armpits. I knew that I was expected to enjoy this. At first I laughed (though I don't think the laughter was very pleasurable, more a matter of physiological reflex), but he always prolonged it until I began to cry, from pain, fear (from my sense of total powerlessness), and sheer exhaustion. At that point he would climb to his feet and angrily and contemptuously denounce



me as a 'baby,' in front of other family members and sometimes visitors. It had, I think, to be a public performance: my humiliation required witnesses to be complete. My mother sometimes tried, feebly, to intervene, but was informed that it was 'good for me.' The sexual nature of the act (as symbolic rape) is obvious. Whether my father derived some form of sexual satisfaction from it I can't say; I know I didn't. In so far as I experienced the ritual as sexual (on whatever unconscious level), it had the effect of destroying any sense that sex can be pleasurable, and associating it with pain and humiliation. This confirms, I think, the now common perception of rape: it is much less motivated by a desire for sexual pleasure than by a desire to express power, domination and hatred.

There is doubtless a close connection between these two components — positive and negative — of my own sexuality, the connection being narcissistic. I identified with my fictitious 'heroes-who-turned-out-to-be-villains': like them, I was designated as 'bad,' and their screams when they died corresponded to the moment when I burst into tears (and sometimes actually screamed) at the 'climax' (so to speak) of the 'spreadsheets.' The compassion and tenderness I felt for them were perhaps projections of my own needs. Looking back, then, I can see that the whole basis upon which my adult sexuality developed was already formed before the age of eight, and I deduce from this not only that there is indeed such a thing as 'infantile sexuality' but that adult sexuality is continuous with it.

It seems that at the court of Louis XIII infantile sexuality wasn't a problem; it becomes one in a culture where sexuality itself is seen as 'filthy,' 'degrading,' 'nasty,' etc. — a culture wherein its very existence has to be denied because children must be seen as 'innocent' and innocence is regarded as synonymous with sexlessness. We tend to believe today that 'Victorian' attitudes to sex belong to the past, but their legacy is still very much with us, producing such phenomena as the 'sexual revolution' of the '60s characterized by the practice of 'wife-swapping.'

The problem of children's sexuality — and the impossibility of any solution within the existing social/ideological structures — seems to me to have been poignantly and troublingly dramatized by Bunuel in his depictions of pre-adolescent girls in *Viridiana* and *Le Journal d'une Femme de Chambre*. Bunuel is able to represent these children as both innocent and sexual because he sees no contradiction between the two: this is what makes the characters so touching and so vulnerable. Rita (*Viridiana*), who is clearly somewhat the older of the two, is already beginning to be corrupted by the 'poisonous pedagogy' of the adult world that makes sexuality furtive, secretive and frightening: she suffers from sexual nightmares about black bulls coming out of closets: hardly surprising considering that she is surrounded by sexually repressed and frustrated adults (her mother Ramona, Don Jaime). The innocence of Claire (*Journal*) is as yet uncontaminated, which makes it particularly seductive to corrupted adults (without the least intention on her part). In both films the child's innocence is contrasted with the sexual fears and inhibitions of the adults: hence Rita can grab the teats of the cow without hesitation when *Viridiana* shrinks back in physical revulsion; she also enjoys fondling the phallic handles of the skipping rope and giving Don Jaime the pleasure of watching her legs as she skips. Little Claire enjoys letting snails crawl over her bare flesh, within an adult environment characterized by physical fear and sexual perversion. Bunuel, in short, allows his children an *authentic* innocence. That is what makes the (offscreen) rape and murder of Claire by Joseph, fascist and sadist, one of the most terrible events

in the cinema, and our last view of her, dead and violated, her snails, released from captivity, crawling over her body, one of its most indelible images.

\*\*\*

If the concept of infantile sexuality has proved difficult for our culture to accept, the concept of constitutional bisexuality provokes even stronger resistance. It has structured much of my own work for the past decade or so, which may help to account for the fact that I now receive so few reviews (and most of those unfavourable). No one, apparently, wishes to confront the issue: journalists prefer to regard it as just plain silly (such subversive notions having no place within the bourgeois press), and academics for the most part don't wish to be distracted from the satisfaction of contemplating their own Lacanian navels. Despite superficially drastic changes since I was young, the bias against homosexuality remains very strong (and takes increasingly surreptitious and insidious forms, at least in so-called 'educated' circles, as 'liberal decency' precludes overt expressions of distaste or hostility). The notion that *everyone* may carry within him/herself homosexual potentialities (however repressed or sublimated) is not something your 'liberal' academic wishes even to discuss: heterosexuals have too much at stake, and won't risk jeopardizing their position of ideological privilege. To me the concept makes sense. I don't believe I was born homosexual (though obviously I was born with the potential to *become* it). I believe (with Freud) that I was born with an innate but indeterminate sexuality that could be constructed in various ways according to the environment (the immediate family environment, the wider social/ideological environment) into which I entered. (The infant Louis XIII, we should recall, when he first wanted someone to play with his cock, summoned a page). If I had been allowed to develop 'naturally' (a logical impossibility, of course, as we are all born into ideology, but there are degrees of coercion and that is the point), I would be able now to relate erotically to members of either sex and in a wide variety of ways. It was doubtless the peculiarities — the particular stresses and dynamics — of my immediate environment that led me into the path that patriarchal society decrees to be 'abnormal' or 'perverted' because it doesn't suit its convenience, indeed, produces active resistance to its norms.

For gays, Alice Miller sets up an enormous obstacle to acceptance of her work: her attitude to homosexuality, which is far less progressive than Freud's. References to it are sparse, but they are not ambiguous. This, from near the beginning of *For Your Own Good* (p. 18) is characteristic:

If it is an axiom of psychoanalytic training that everything that happened to the patient in childhood was the result of his drive conflicts, then sooner or later the patient must be taught to regard himself as wicked, destructive, megalomaniac, or homosexual without understanding the reasons for his particular behaviour.

— Of course, there must be *reasons* why one takes the path of homosexuality (just as there must be reasons why one takes that of heterosexuality). But here Miller clearly aligns homosexuality with 'wickedness,' 'destructiveness,' 'megalomania': for her it is the same kind of thing. In this it seems to me that she enlists herself and her formidable powers of persuasion precisely on the side of that 'poisonous pedagogy' that almost destroyed me, drove me into a thoroughly inappropriate marriage (thereby deeply harming an admirable woman and causing, in the long run, various degrees of distress to our three children), and ensured that guilt would play a per-



manent, probably ineradicable role in my life. I shudder to imagine what became of gays and lesbians who were patients in the days when she still practised. The assumption that one exists outside ideology can have very serious consequences: one is easy prey to the dominant ideology of the culture, and no longer has to question one's (its) assumptions, because they are equated with 'truth.' (Readers interested in pursuing further the relationship between Miller's work and my own might consider reading my article of Fascism and cinema in the last issue of *CineAction!* in conjunction with her essay on Hitler's childhood in *For Your Own Good*. Though the approaches are quite different, the two pieces strike me as not at all incompatible — complementary rather than contradictory).

The implicit rejection of the validity of homosexuality is profoundly linked to the denial of the reality of infantile sexuality. Freud posits for the infant an *indeterminate* sexuality not yet tied to specific means, aims or objects ('polymorphous perversity' — the word 'perversity' seems peculiarly inappropriate if this is indeed our natural state). If one can think of sexuality (as our culture tends overwhelmingly to do) only in exclusively genital terms, then perhaps one should substitute the word 'eroticism.' This innate desire (need) for physical pleasure and physical communication (at once the subtlest and most direct means of communication we have — I can learn more, essentially, about a man from going to bed with him than from hours of conversation) is subsequently constructed by culture into what the cultural norms demand: *our* cultural norms being determined by patriarchy, the law of the Father or heterosexual male. Heterosexuality (on which the clearcut division of men and women, male and female, masculine and feminine, is built) is obviously essential to the patriarchal organization and to its subordination of women.

Gays and lesbians have the potential to be the leaders of a *real* sexual revolution — one that attacked the dominant social and ideological structures, as opposed to a 'revolution' that simply permitted heterosexual males further self-indulgence. Gays exist of necessity outside the norms of the culture, and are consequently in the best position to examine those norms, analyze the ways in which they are oppressive and restrictive, and lead the way to the exploration of radical alternatives. Plenty of analysis has taken place, but the critique of the heterosexual norms has been concerned mainly with how they oppress gays rather than with their oppressiveness *per se*. The fact that gay couples or groups can only in rare cases legally adopt children seems to have inhibited any serious exploration by gay people of the possibility of alternative families — non-biological, communal, etc. Today, the healthiest place for a child to grow up might well be a gay/lesbian commune, where s/he could find abundant love, warmth, tenderness and caring without the usual corollaries of possessiveness, domination and traditional gendering. I have found that in general openly gay people, because they learn to live outside the traditional family structures and the ideological assumptions that sustain them, are remarkable free of tendencies to oppress and dominate.

Unfortunately, the gay culture has not yet been able to free itself cleanly from the dominant ideological structures. In particular, gay men's sexual arrangements remain trapped within the monogamy/promiscuity opposition ('promiscuity' being defined here as casual, often anonymous, sex without commitment). Some manage to combine the two terms (a pseudo-monogamous relationship modeled on heterosexual marriage, with casual sex on the side), but that merely repeats the opposition in another form without resolving it. (It is "

pity that Frank Ripploh, when he made *Taxi Zum Klo* — still probably the most progressively gay movie — was unable to do more than reproduce this opposition all over again, without providing a critique of it or suggesting how it might be transcended). Few seem willing to explore the possibility of multiple relationships, multiple commitments, and any embryonic development in that direction has been arrested by the onset of AIDS.

\*\*\*

Miller signals repeatedly that she is sympathetic to feminism, though she never actually identifies herself as a feminist (because she rejects 'theory'? The development of feminist theory has been crucially important to just about every progressive development in our culture, but the basis on which it rests, and everything most important in its tenets, seem to me objectively verifiable). But where would feminism be today without the notions that sexuality and gender are socially constructed? Presumably, back in the stalemate of 'Different, but equal': different, because men are *innately* assertive, forceful, aggressive, rational, etc., while women are innately gentle, submissive, sensitive, emotional, etc. Therefore, in practical terms, within a culture built upon power, competition and domination, *not* equal. As Miller herself is assertive, forceful, aggressive and rational, she can't possibly accept this. Freud offered (through drive theory and the Oedipus complex and its resolution) an account of how sexuality and gender are constructed. There is no equivalent, so far, in Miller's work. She convinces me that it is high time the Freudian hegemony was challenged, and that Freud made a crucial error in reducing the reality of child abuse to his patients' fantasies. But she leaves a lot unanswered.

The phenomenon I have most noted from my own experience of people and relationships (and from personal introspection) is that virtually everyone in our culture grows up with a sense of guilt and inferiority. Each individual copes (or fails to cope) with this in a different way: by meekly accepting it as reality (I recall a cartoon in a magazine: a psychiatrist telling his stereotypically wimpish-looking patient, 'It's not that you have an inferiority complex, Mr. —. It's just that you really *are* inferior'); by over-compensation (arrogance, an assumption of superiority, inferiority); by over-compensation (arrogance, an assumption of superiority, macho bluster and bullying, emotional and/or physical brutality, etc. — all of which tend to give themselves away as precarious and fragile 'covers,' but not before they've done a great deal of harm); by trying to analyze and understand its sources (a profoundly threatening activity — its roots are *always* within the family, even when other factors, especially economic, are also present, and analysis must lead logically to an assault on the family structure). It seems to me that this might prove a far more profitable line of inquiry into the foundations of our culture than Freudian drive theory. No one could claim that the human infant is *born* with a 'natural' sense of its inferiority or an innate sense of guilt: it would be absurd. We would therefore be working from the knowledge that we are dealing with a phenomenon both profoundly harmful (to oneself and others) and culturally produced. *Why* are we, as young children, made to feel inferior and guilty, and to internalize these feelings? We would find, obviously, that the phenomenon has its source in very early childhood, and is an inevitable consequence of the social/sexual organization upon which our culture is built. We could explore the ways in which it differs for males and females — surely crucial to the construction of gender. We could no longer hide away from positive and radical action behind screens of





The dead hand of patriarchy: Dorothy Malone in *Written on the Wind*

essentialism (Freud, Lacanian or whatever). Miller's work, theoretically primitive, becomes of incomparable value here: it offers us the starting-point for a whole new effort of radical interrogation which really *could* lead to the transformation of our culture at its very roots.

In universalizing the Oedipus complex, Freud also straitjacketed our dreams. Why should dreams have a single meaning, a single function — the expression of a repressed sexual wish? Some may, but the unconscious is surely not that simple. For me — and from numerous discussions I've had with others the phenomenon seems widespread — the commonest dreams are about guilt and punishment: irrational guilt, instilled in childhood, and disproportionate punishment: impossible to accept consciously because of its sheer absurdity (why should a child feel guilty? — the child is always 'innocent'). The child doubtless feels guilty partly because it hates its parents, but it hates its parents for perfectly sound reasons — because of the harm they inflict. It cannot *accept* those reasons: it is taught to 'Honour thy father and thy mother.' Although irrational, the guilt is incredibly powerful, damaging, and perhaps ultimately ineradicable; although bringing it to consciousness can help, many are permanently crippled and incapacitated by it. The only human being I have met who seems to be free of guilt feelings has nothing but the simplest dreams — pleasant, untroubling images with scarcely any narrative content. He is also the only person I know who appears genuinely and

without effort to *like* himself, quite unselfconsciously, without conceit or narcissism. People find him childlike (but not childish). Because of all this, he remains strangely 'other,' because unlike anyone else I know. Against my image of him I place the image of Robert Stack in *Written on the Wind*, flinging the whisky in the face of his own reflection in the mirror; an image and a gesture that I easily relate to, and recognize in myself and others.

I cannot believe that guilt is the child's natural and spontaneous reaction to the wickedness of its own innate drives: it is *always* instilled by the adults, and is very closely linked to the sense of inferiority and to self-hatred. And our cinema — our narratives — could be at least as readily analyzed in terms of the various possible responses to guilt and inferiority as in terms of the Oedipal trajectory. The experience of irrational guilt and inferiority is always, by definition, reactionary — it can do nothing but hold us back; to repudiate it is a radical act. Which is why our mainstream cinema, even at its finest, because it is officially (and superficially) committed to the 'dominant ideology,' is always compelled to make at least a perfunctory show of restoring oppression at the end of the movie, in the so-called 'happy ending.' Guilt and inferiority, with their concomitants of frustration, resentment, hatred, are built into the monogamy/family structure, and will only begin to evaporate when that structure collapses. Which is why conventional psychiatry, bought up lock, stock and barrel by bourgeois culture, must always (like the Hollywood



movie) work towards a 'happy ending': restoring the family values, demanding reconciliation and conformity; and why Freud himself believed that children should not be taught to be revolutionaries.

Alice Miller's work might well provide a valuable starting-point for social revolution, but only if we can carry through its implications way beyond the point she has reached so far. She leaves a lot of explaining still to do: *Why* is child-abuse (in all its myriad forms, sexual, physical, psychological) so common, so pervasive? (To impose guilt, humiliation, a sense of inferiority or worthlessness on children is clearly a form of child-abuse). How does one set about preventing it? It is simply not enough to answer, Parents should respect their children and their children's rights, unless one goes on to analyze why they don't. I submit (to sum it up) that there are a number of causes (beyond the frustrations induced by economic deprivation, which I have no wish to minimize):

1. Sexual and emotional frustration within the prison of monogamous marriage.
2. The power structures embodied in and reproduced by the hierarchal structure of the patriarchal nuclear family.
3. The over-valuation in the culture of 'masculinity.'
4. The frustration and rage of men when they can't live up to the 'ideal' masculine image.
5. The frustration and rage of women who feel themselves reduced to the status of, and treated as, second-class citizens.
6. The repression of homosexual desire (as Freud insists, what is repressed is never annihilated but will always strive to return — in monstrous and murderous forms.)

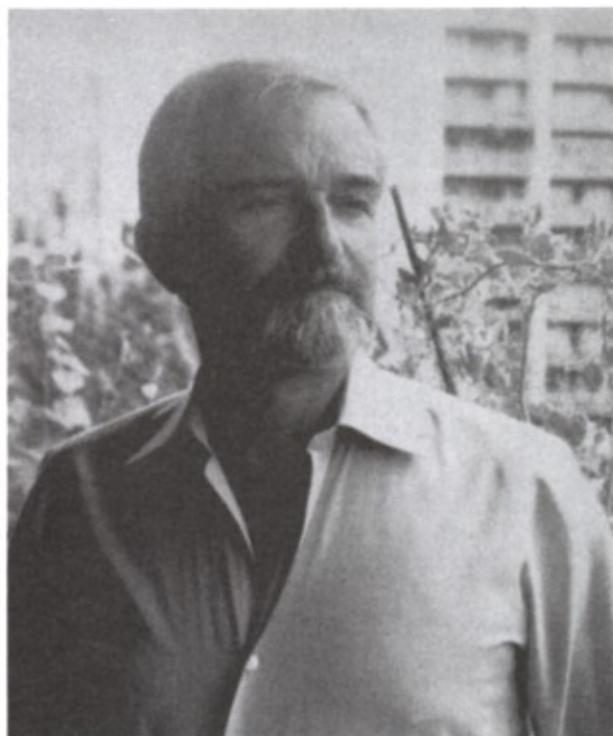
The remedy? The end of marriage (as we know it); the dissolution of the family (as we know it); the full recognition of men's 'femininity' and women's 'masculinity'; the complete social acceptance of every shade of sexuality, from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality, and every degree of bisexuality in between.

\*\*\*

*Postscript:* It is possible that this article will offend or annoy some people in certain ways. I want to comment on two of these: the fact that it is only very loosely tied to film; and the drawing upon intimate personal experience. For me, these two characteristics are closely connected.

Our culture seems to be built upon categories: there is 'film criticism,' there is 'literary criticism,' there is 'psychology,' there is 'social theory,' etc., etc., each indicating a particular (and of course perfectly valid) field of interest. But should not *all* such interests be subordinate to an interest in 'life'? — Isn't that what animates them, gives them meaning and vitality? If one talks intelligently about a film, isn't that (by definition) a medium for talking about 'life'? The corollary of which is that a critic who aspires to being taken seriously needs to talk about more than cinema, providing a context within which his/her views on cinema develop whatever force or cogency they may have.

Hence the increasing necessity for me of talking personally. This has been given great impetus and endorsement by reading Alice Miller, but the impulse preceded that (*Hitchcock's Films Revisited* was completed a year before I read any of her books). 'The personal is political': that phrase, derived from the insistence on the importance of personal experience within the feminist movement, has been immensely helpful to me. We should all begin to speak from personal experience, linking that experience to wider, more general issues and theoretical concerns: speak of what has formed us, what has influenced us, what has affected us, what has traumatized us,



Robin Wood.

without fear or embarrassment. We have our common humanity, and should be able to accept one another as we are. Think of the possibilities of sharing, communication and understanding that would be opened up! It might be the basis for a new socialism: 'Socialism with a human face,' to borrow a phrase from Gorbachev, a personally-based *glasnost*.

The individual interest in film or in literature, etc., is merely insulating if it is not subordinate to, and at all points governed and guided by, an interest in 'life.' People — especially academics — hide themselves away within various protective shells (the 'Professor of Film,' the 'Professor of Literature' — or of other 'academic' disciplines . . . Not to speak of aberrations like 'Administrative Studies' or 'Business Management,' which should have no place within any self-respecting university. They have nothing to do with 'life' in any significant sense of the word, and the fact that they have been permitted to infiltrate the university and even achieve dominant roles within its structure testifies simply to the university's current degeneracy).

If this article transgresses in certain ways (such was my intention), I would hope that its shortcomings will not be used to counter its transgressive principles. I am trying (in my last year in academics) to encourage my students to revolt against the whole oppressive concept of the 'academic' (whatever this costs them in grades), and to think and write what they *want* to think and write, expressing it in whatever terms and styles they feel to be appropriate: anything but the 'impersonal,' 'academic' jargon that is imposed on them by the (frequently nondescript and undistinguished) academics who have power over them (and whose lives and careers and egos are predicated on that power). Only a revolution in academia can redeem it (and it would have to come from the students); otherwise, it has discredited itself — it no longer has any real force as 'a creative centre of civilisation.'

This article is dedicated to Alan Cherwinski and William Paul, who persuaded me to read Alice Miller.



# Letters

Editor:

I am responding to your article (Spring '89) *Mermaids: Singing Off Key?* by Marion Harrison.

Obviously Harrison had expectations in this movie that were not fulfilled. I disagree with Harrison in her statement that the movie "fools us into thinking it is a feminist film . . ." and also that the relationship between Gabrielle and Mary is "gratuitous" and that the characters therefore "traditionally will be seen by the audience as whores . . ." (!?) Whores?

First of all, it is obvious that the film was not intended to be romantic. Comparing it to other films whose primary intent is to explore lesbian romance makes little sense. In *Mermaids* the lesbianism is incidental, but important for two reasons: (1) it acknowledges not only that lesbians exist, but (we, they) exist in a "normal" "average" way, without crashing symbols and angst-ridden dramatics — which is a far sight more insightful than most films are wil-

ling to allow (think how many slave dramas African-American actors were in before they were allowed to have the colour of their skin incidental to the plot); and (2) it heightens the sense of exclusion that Polly feels in her life.

None of the characters in *Mermaids* are stellar heroines, far from it. So I disagree again with Harrison when she states: "... the female protagonists are there simply to be admired but with no reason given as to why they should be" or that "(*Mermaids*) fall(s) into the mainstream cinematic pretense of portraying women sympathetically while subtle negative aspects of the three female characters belie any attempts to develop positive images."

It is my reverse opinion that we have two disagreeable individuals; Mary, who isn't half bad in the personality department but who is a con-artist; Gabrielle, a relentlessly self-absorbed, vapid neurotic; and then the third individual, Polly, who can't get a fix on reality until it hits her like a mack truck.

The purpose is to show that reality, to

expose it by stripping the layers of veiled pretense from inside Polly's head and by ripping off the veneer of competency and success from the polished comportment of Gabrielle and Mary.

Speaking of reality, "explicit voyeurism" and "glossing over crucial issues of sexuality" have little meaning or no meaning to me in consideration of this film. Speaking of annoying, one thing that surpasses failed expectations in seeing a film is reading a critique based on failed expectations. Please review films from what is there, and not from your personal expectations. I certainly don't appreciate Harrison's attitude that an audience would think that Gabrielle and Mary are whores. It is an insult to the many people who saw *Mermaids* and enjoyed it.

Lighten up.

Sincerely,  
Geraldine M. Murphy  
Sacramento, CA

---



re:vue

The Alternative Video Source

Foreign, Canadian,  
Independent & Experimental  
Film on Video

1280 Bay St. (at Yorkville) • Toronto M5R 3L1 • 922-5647

---



## HITCHCOCK'S FILMS REVISITED



ROBIN WOOD

JEAN RENOIR  
The World of His Films



AMERICA IN  
THE MOVIES  
MICHAEL WOOD



AMERICAN MYTH  
LEGACY OF

VIETNAM  
JOHN HELLMANN

# Reel in more than film criticism.

## Hitchcock's Films Revisited

**Robin Wood**

In 1965, *Hitchcock's Films* quickly set a new standard for film criticism. Today, the original work is reprinted here in its entirety along with a new introduction and eight chapters which reflect Wood's ideological shift to Marxist and feminist perspectives.

"Absolutely astonishing." — Arthur Penn

395 pp., photos, \$29.00 cloth

## Jean Renoir

The World of His Films

**Leo Braudy**

*With a New Preface by the Author*

The work of Jean Renoir is one of the most impressive in the history of film. By focusing on the themes of nature, theater, society, and the artist-hero, Leo Braudy looks at Renoir's collected works and at how Renoir explores the possibilities and limits of social cohesion.

"Braudy's study of the films is good-natured, seriously considered, culturally enlightened, prodigiously researched, and excellently written."

— Andrew Sarris, *The New York Times Book Review*

*A Morningside Book*

288 pp., photos, \$45.00 cloth, \$17.50 paper

## America In The Movies

**Michael Wood**

*With A New Introduction by the Author*

Is the America portrayed in movies really America? Michael Wood's critique focuses on films from the late 1930s to the 1960s — those that studied the back of the American mind. Each chapter discusses a different theme in film history and shows how Hollywood's most popular films reveal America's preoccupations, anxieties, and dreams of the time.

"An unheard-of combination of virtues for a movie book — lucid, well-informed, and obviously written in high spirits."

— David Bromwich, *The New York Times Book Review*

*A Morningside Book*

206 pp., photos, \$30.00 cloth, \$14.50 paper

## American Myth and The Legacy of Vietnam

**John Hellmann**

An exciting new look at Vietnam's lasting impact on the national psyche based on the memoirs, novels, and films — from the 1958 best seller *The Ugly American* to *Star Wars* — through which Americans have tried to come to terms with the Vietnam experience.

"Quite simply, the most sophisticated analysis of the literary reflection of America's involvement in Vietnam."

— Robert D. Schulzinger, *University of Colorado*

241 pp., photos, \$14.50 paper

To order, send check/money order, including \$3.00 for postage and handling, or call and use MC, VISA or AMEX.



**COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS**

Dept 550, 136 South Broadway, Irvington, NY 10533 • (914) 591-9111





## Contributors

ANDREW BRITTON is the author of *Katharine Hepburn: the thirties and after* (Tyneside Cinema) and the forthcoming *Reading Hollywood*.

BRYAN BRUCE is a Toronto writer and filmmaker.

JOHN CHAMPAGNE is a Ph.D student in Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His first novel, *The Blue Lady's Hands*, was published in October of 1988 by Lyle Stuart. A second novel, *When the Parrot Sings* will be published in May. He is on the board of the directors of the Pittsburgh International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

VIVECA GRETTON has recently completed her Master's thesis in film studies at York University.

FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ teaches at Atkinson College, York University.

SUSAN LORD is working on her M.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies, York University.

JOHN McCULLOUGH is an M.A. candidate in the Graduate Programme in Social and Political Thought at York University.

DEBORAH ROOT recently received her Ph.D from Social and Political Thought at York University. Her interests are in the areas of culture, politics, and colonialism.

TONY WILLIAMS teaches at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

ROBIN WOOD has resigned from York University, taking early retirement. He intends to extricate himself from the academic world and devote his energies to writing fiction (though he will not abandon criticism altogether). He recently completed the first draft of a novel.

Back Cover: Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray in Douglas Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow*



